

**EI-793**

**MARY JOSEPHINE KEANE LENNEY**

**BIRTHDATE: NOVEMBER 18, 1922**

**INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 21, 1996**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 73**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG**

**IRELAND, 1935**

**AGE: 13**

**SHIP: THE MANHATTAN**

**PORT: QUEENSTOWN (CÓBH)**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **IRELAND: BALLINA, COUNTY MAYO**
- **US: NEW YORK, NY; COHOES, NY**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1996. I'm in Cohoes, in upstate New York with Mary Jo Lenney. Mrs. Lenney came from Ireland in 1935. She was thirteen years old at that time and she was detained for two days at Ellis Island. I should also say for the sake of the tape that you may hear footsteps overheard. There are people walking back and forth on the second floor of the building and traffic may also be picked up on the recording.

Mrs. Lenney, can we begin by you giving me your name as you were born in Ireland?

LENNEY: Mary Josephine Keane.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Keane, please?

LENNEY: K-E-A-N-E.

SIGRIST: And what is your date of birth, please?

LENNEY: Well, I have two birth dates. One was March twen — March 19, 1924 and then there was another March — November. So I don't know what transpired in between. I think maybe it was baptism or church or whatever. I don't know, but I go by March 19, 1924.

SIGRIST: Okay, because the birth date you gave me here on the form you filled out is November 18, 1922.

LENNEY: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Which would make you thirteen in 1935.

LENNEY: Okay, well, go by that one then, Paul.

SIGRIST: Okay. [Chuckles] Which one would you prefer to go by?

LENNEY: Well, for social security reasons I went by the November the 18, 1922.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Okay.

LENNEY: I don't know why there's such discrepancy. I cannot answer that, Paul. I really don't, whether the records were changed or whatever. They're all church records. There are not any government records. They're all church records.

SIGRIST: I see. Where in Ireland were you born?

LENNEY: In—about four miles outside of a town called Ballina.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LENNEY: B-A-L-L-I-N-A. In County Mayo and it's on the west coast of Ireland.

SIGRIST: You said the town is four miles out from—

LENNEY: From the area where I lived. My—my area was a little town land called Scotchfort.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LENNEY: S-C-O-T-C-H-F-O-R-T.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about the day you were born? Did anyone ever tell you a story about the day you were born?

LENNEY: The only thing that I know of the day I was born was I—we were all born at home, my oldest brother and myself, and my father went to Ballina to get the doctor and we—he had a midwife there, a lady that lived close by, to come in and be with my mother and I was born at home.

SIGRIST: Did you stay in that same town when you were growing up?

LENNEY: Yes.

SIGRIST: What are some of the things that stick out in your mind about the town itself? What did it look like? Let's start off with that.

LENNEY: Well, let me see now. It's—it's—it's very historical and there's a river Moy that runs through.

SIGRIST: What is the name of the river?

LENNEY: River Moy, M-O-Y.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

LENNEY: That's one of the largest rivers in Ireland, and I went there once in a while with my mother shopping. We would go and get our staples there, like flour and sugar and tea, but my parents always brought their produce there, like the vegetables and the eggs and the butter because we had a dairy farm and vegetable farm. We also raised pigs and chickens and ducks and geese. [Laughs] And cattle. So that that's how we made our—our living. We brought the farm supplies there and exchanged them for food or other things.

SIGRIST: Where would you do that? Where would you exchange the produce for other staples?

LENNEY: Usually a store. The lady would take them and put them in display and she would sell them to people that came in and wanted to buy them. You know, the city people.

SIGRIST: And what kinds of things did you get in return?

LENNEY: We would get flour, tea, sugar. My father would get a case of stout for the week, and if we needed any like baking supplies. My mother made all her own bread, but we needed baking supplies like cream of tartar, raisins. We didn't get too much fruit. I never ate any oranges or bananas until I came to the United States, but we had an apple orchard and we had gooseberries and blueberries and we grew all our own vegetables.

SIGRIST: Was—was all the transaction this kind of barter system or did sometimes your parents sell—

LENNEY: They sold like—they sold cattle and they'd sell potatoes and get money for it.

SIGRIST: I see.

LENNEY: Yeah, to buy our, you know, shoes and clothes and whatever.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk about life on the farm. First of all, can you describe the building that you lived in on the farm?

LENNEY: I lived in a farm house, a stone house with a cement floor, and we had a large kitchen with an open fireplace and we had—you know, there was cupboards around and then there was the—what they called the upper room was like the dining room, and there was a

dining room table and my mother had linen tablecloths on the table.  
We had all lace curtains. You like my lace curtains?

SIGRIST: Yes, very Irish.

LENNEY: [Laughs] And then we had a loft. There was a loft over the kitchen area and my brothers would sleep up there and then there was two other bedrooms and that was the size of the house.

SIGRIST: When you say the house had a cement floor, is there anything that sticks out in your mind about that cement floor?

LENNEY: It was cold. [Laughs] They had little, a couple of little—I don't think we had any rugs on it. They had a rug up in the upper room. Up—the other rooms then were—were wood, but the kitchen floor—the kitchen floor was cement.

SIGRIST: Hmm. Did you have electricity in the house?

LENNEY: No.

SIGRIST: How did you light the house?

LENNEY: Candles, or kerosene lamps.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of dealing with the kerosene lamps or anything that may have happened with the kerosene lamps?

LENNEY: I was afraid of them. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Why? What were you afraid of?

LENNEY: I was afraid that they'd turn over and catch fire, but we had candles and we had open fireplace, and we did all our cooking in the open fireplace.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me how somebody cooks in an open fireplace?

LENNEY: Well, my mother had iron pans and an iron pot and she like, when she'd make the bread, she'd put it in an iron pot and it would bake. She'd hang it over the fire, and it would bake and if she cooked potatoes, she put the potatoes in an iron pot. We had all iron utensils, and then she had a baking dish like, she cooked meat or fish. My father fished in the lake. Our farm was on a lake, Lecoughn, and he would catch salmon and trout, and my mother would clean it and bake it in the oven.

SIGRIST: Can you spell the name of the lake for me, please?

LENNEY: Lecoughn. Lake Lecoughn. Lake Lecoughn, L-A-K-E and Lecoughn, L-E-C-O-U-G-H-N.

SIGRIST: Do you have any other recollections of being a child around the lake? Did you use it for recreational purposes?

LENNEY: Yeah, fishing and we had to go almost to the lake to get our water, our spring water. There were springs near the lake and we brought the water that we needed for cooking and for cleaning or for anything. We'd go up with big buckets and bring it home.

SIGRIST: Whose job in the family was it to bring the water back?

LENNEY: All of us, my brothers and I.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm. Can you name for me everyone who lived in the house?

LENNEY: My parents, which was my father's name was Martin Keane, and my mother's name was Mary Ellen, and my oldest brother was William, and then me, myself, and Patrick Keane and Michael Keane. Three brothers—three boys and one girl.

SIGRIST: You said that your mother's name was Mary Ella?

LENNEY: Mary Ellen. My mother's name was Mary Ellen.

SIGRIST: That's E-L-L—

LENNEY: E-N.

SIGRIST: E-N, Ellen. What was her maiden name?

LENNEY: Rouse.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LENNEY: R-O-U-S-E.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

LENNEY: And she was German extraction because I'm not full-blooded Irish. She was German. Her fa—her family came from Germany.

SIGRIST: Do you know why they went to Ireland?

LENNEY: I have no idea why they went to Ireland, Paul. I have no idea, but my grandfather, my mother's father, was—spent fifteen years here in the States in Pennsylvania in the coal mines and then went back and he had a beautiful farm in the next county, which is Sligo, near Enniscrone, which a beautiful seashore resort.

SIGRIST: Sligo I know how to spell.

LENNEY: Sligo, yeah.

SIGRIST: But the sea-sore—seashore resort?

LENNEY: E-N-N-I-S-C-R-O-N-E, Enniscrone.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

LENNEY: It's beautiful. It's—[Phone rings] Beautiful—

SIGRIST: Ah, we're going to pause for a moment.

LENNEY: Yeah. [Tape off/on]

SIGRIST: Now resuming after the phone call. We were talking about farm life, basically. Can you tell me what your chores were on the farm, specifically?

LENNEY: My chores?

SIGRIST: Yes. What were you responsible for as a girl on the farm?

LENNEY: Everything. [Laughs] During hay season we were kept home from school quite a bit to do the haying because of the inclement weather.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what that process was?

LENNEY: Haying—

SIGRIST: What is haying?

LENNEY: Well, my father—haying—my father would cut the hay and then we'd put it into stacks and leave it there until it was dried out, and then we'd have to put it on the wagons, horse and wagon, and then bring it into the—to the garden, where it was kept and was used as fodder for the cattle. And that was our job, to load the wagons. Now, the other was the potato planting. We helped my mother cut the potatoes and we always had to make sure that there was an eye. You know, you cut the potato in half, but you always had to make sure there was an eye there, called, where it would—where it would root. And then we had to plant it in the fields and my brothers and I did that. And the other thing was we had to pick—go out into the—to the hay fields and pick the stones. There's a lot of stones in Ireland. That's why it's all—there's no wooden fences or wire fences. They're all stone fences because there's so many stones. So to protect your machinery, you had to go out and pick the stones and pile them.

SIGRIST: How long would that take?

LENNEY: Forever. [Laughs] No, it took a long time. But we were—we had to work on the farms, and as a result, sometimes we—we became kind of delinquent in school and I was very upset because I liked school

and you were way behind. You weren't able to keep up with your classes.

SIGRIST: I'm just wondering, because you were one girl in a family of, you know, you had three brothers, correct?

LENNEY: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: And yourself. Were—were you expected to do the same kinds of farm work that the brothers were?

LENNEY: I was.

SIGRIST: Or did you have other duties that—

LENNEY: Well, I helped in the—in the house. I helped my mother because my mother would go out and work, too, and I would help her, you know, clean the house and do the cooking. But I had to do most of the inside work and then I also had to go outside. As a matter of fact, that's why my aunt said when she came home to visit, she said, "You were always working. You were always expected to do everything." This is typical of Irish mothers, you know. The girls are supposed to do everything.

SIGRIST: This—

LENNEY: The boys are kind of pampered.

SIGRIST: The aunt that's in America, whose sister is she?

LENNEY: My broth—my father's.

SIGRIST: She's your father's sister.

LENNEY: Umm. My mother didn't have a sister. She only had one brother. There was only two in her family, but there was eleven in my father's family.

SIGRIST: Do you—what was I going to ask? I started to think about your German grandfather, actually, in Ireland. Do you ever remember going to visit him?

LENNEY: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Your mother's father?

LENNEY: Sure.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about him being perhaps different than you were in some way?

LENNEY: Oh, he was very, very rigid. Very strict and he operated his farm on a business, and he had a beautiful farm and he had a beautiful home and he had all kinds of modern equipment. He was very, very progressive. Farmer. Very progressive. Yes.

SIGRIST: How often would you visit him?

LENNEY: Oh, maybe once or twice a year. I was with him the night he died. For some reason, my mother got the call that he had a stroke and I went with my father and my mother and my brothers were left home with the—one of the neighbors. And it take us from Mayo to Sligo,

probably—it took quite a while, probably about a half a day to get there with horse and buggy. And he was alive when we got there, and soon as my mother went in and said hello to him or greeted him, he only lasted about an hour after that. And then it was her duty to take him and lay—they laid him on the kitchen floor and she gave him a bath and my father shaved him, and then he was put back in the bed that he died on and the room was draped in white linen sheets. And he laid there and then all the neighbors came and in the upper room was a big party. [Chuckles] With all kinds of food and drinking and everybody partied, and the next day the undertaker came with a casket. There was no embalming. There's no embalming in Ireland, and they came with a casket and brought him to the church and he was one night in church and in Ireland they leave the caskets opened, and people—and what I like there is that the body is never left alone. They never leave it alone. Somebody is always there with the body.

SIGRIST: That's just part of the social custom.

LENNEY: That's right.

SIGRIST: Someone stays.

LENNEY: It's still the same, but they don't have the big wakes like they do—did years ago. That's a long time ago.

SIGRIST: Thank you, that's good information.

LENNEY: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about—you mentioned school and you liked school. How old are you in Ireland when you start school?

LENNEY: Well, I started school when I was three years old, believe it or not. I was what they called lower infants. My brother was five and I was three. It was two years between us, and the reason I had to go to school with him—we had to go through a farm where there was a big gander. The female, like, and he was afraid so I had to go with him to protect him and we had to walk about three miles to school.  
[Laughs]

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the things that you enjoyed about attending school, as you were getting older?

LENNEY: I like competition. I like to be as good as the next guy and the other thing, we had to bring turf or peat to keep the fires warm, to keep the rooms warm, and if you failed to bring your peat, you got punished. I remember getting punished a couple of times.

SIGRIST: Yes, and how would they do that?

LENNEY: With a whip—with a straw—with a cane. They used a cane. Corporal punishment.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it to me—?

LENNEY: The Irish can be very cruel.

SIGRIST: And that was standard practice in the schools at that time?

LENNEY: Yes. Yes, yes, yes, and also the—the—we were segregated. The girls had their female teachers and the boys had masters. And when I was here—well, anyway, I'll tell you that later.

SIGRIST: The—can you describe for me where the peat came from? How you—

LENNEY: From our bogs.

SIGRIST: How—how does one harvest that?

LENNEY: My father went out in late spring and cut the peat and in our land it was very deep and it was black and the blacker it is, the better because it's almost—see, if you leave it long enough, it will turn to coal, but they never left it that long. And he would cut it and we'd spread it out on the ground, and then when it was dry, we put it into little—what would you call it? Little reeks [sic], and then after it was completely dry, then we brought it home in the horse and wagon and we stacked it in—in the barnyard, and that's what we used for heating. And every room in the house has a fireplace. So every room had to be heated.

SIGRIST: An open fireplace?

LENNEY: Open fireplace in every room.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, and then how—how would you burn the peat? I mean what, did you just throw it in the fireplace and—

LENNEY: Throw it in the fireplace.

SIGRIST: And set it on fire.

LENNEY: And set it on fire.

SIGRIST: Um, does it have a smell or—

LENNEY: Yes, it does. As a matter of fact, when you're driving through Ireland, you can get the smell. has a different pet---

SIGRIST: Can you describe what that smells like?

LENNEY: Well, if you ever went by a coal factory, you know, have you ever gone by a coal factory, Paul? You get that funny coal smell, but it's a little more pungent than that because it's—actually, it's not ripe enough to be --- to burn, but they have to burn it anyway. They don't have any choice.

SIGRIST: And is it smoky when it burns?

LENNEY: Yes, it is, very smoky. Sometimes the room can become very smoky but they have to keep the chimneys cleaned all the time.

SIGRIST: Could you parents read and write?

LENNEY: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

LENNEY: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: How important to them was education?

LENNEY: Very important. My father, his oldest sister, Aunt Mary, one of the oldest of eleven, went to the University of Dublin. She was highly educated and then went to England and got into nursing school. My Aunt Barbara and my Aunt Bea went to the convent in Ballina after they finished grammar school in the local school. The nat—we called the national school and when they finished there, they called them colleges in Ireland. It's comparable to our high school and they went there for four years and then Aunt Barbara wanted to be a nurse, so she left Ireland at seventeen, and Aunt Bea and they went to England and my Aunt Barbara was -- worked domestic, worked in homes and when she was twenty-one—you weren't allowed to get into nurse's training until you were twenty-one. She got into—she went to Saint Bartholomew's, which was one—which is one of the biggest hospitals in England, and had her nurse's training and Aunt Mary went to St. Mary's and their training was four years.

SIGRIST: These are your father's sisters.

LENNEY: These are all my father's sisters, yeah.

SIGRIST: Right, so they're roughly a generation older than you are.

LENNEY: Right, yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you also talk to me about religious life in Ireland? What religion were you?

LENNEY: Catholic.

SIGRIST: And was there a church nearby?

LENNEY: Yes, within walking distance.

SIGRIST: Yes. Do you have any stories that you like to tell about that church or about attending services there or anything that's exciting?

LENNEY: We went to church every—every Sunday and if we went to, to — we had to go to confession once a week and we had to fast from eleven o'clock Saturday night until the next day, until we received. Most of the time we walked to church. We always made First Fridays, which was the first Friday of the month. Our house was consecrated to the Sacred Heart and we had lighted candle, a vigil candle with a picture of the Sacred Heart all the time, and I used to decorate the shrine with flowers.

SIGRIST: Where was that located in the house?

LENNEY: In the kitchen.

SIGRIST: And is that also a typical thing at that time?

LENNEY: Typical tradition, yeah. We said the Rosary every night around the fireplace. My father would say the Rosary and we would answer him. When somebody died, my father would sit with them and hold the Blessed Candle in their hands and read their— and recite the Rosary. He was wonderful like that, and my mother would help take care of them or whatever. That was the neighbors, you know, Paul. We also would have, maybe once a year have the priest come to the house and say Mass. That was a big ritual and all the neighbors would come and everybody would take off from their duties. And Father would come and you'd fix the kitchen table with a linen cloth

and the candles, Blessed Candles and the Holy Water and he would come and say Mass and then there was all kinds of fancy breads and people would spend the whole day there conversing with the priest. It was a very—it was a ritual.

SIGRIST: Did—did someone—every year was it somebody else's house?

LENNEY: Everybody else's house.

SIGRIST: How was it chosen? Whose house? How was the house chosen?

LENNEY: You could go and say to the priest, "Well, I'd like—Father, I would like you go come to my house now, next three months from now or whatever." I don't know if they do it that much anymore, Paul, but that's what we did.

SIGRIST: What were the important religious holidays that you celebrated?

LENNEY: Christmas was important. Christmas is a lot different than in this country.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it for me?

LENNEY: There was not—was no exchangin' of gifts. The house was decorated in holly and as kids we went out into the woods and picked holly with the red berries and we decorated the whole house with holly and it was beautiful. Holly grows wild in Ireland and on Christmas Eve, every—there was a candle on every window and the purpose of that was if somebody was wandering outside, that they were welcome to come in and have something to eat and you would greet them. And then Christmas Mass was very important.

SIGRIST: So you would then go to the church for Mass.

LENNEY: We would go to church.

SIGRIST: And then what about Christmas Day?

LENNEY: Christmas Day you had a big—my mother would cook a turkey or a goose or whatever. But we always had a big Christmas dinner, and people that came, relatives or friends or neighbors—somebody didn't maybe as much, they were always welcome to come and nobody ever left hungry.

SIGRIST: Now, were you speaking English at this time or is Gaelic being spoken in this part of Ireland?

LENNEY: No, Gaelic was taught in the schools but I didn't learn too much of it because—during my grandmother's, Grandmother Rouse, she spoke the real Gaelic and then when the English overtook Ireland, they introduced the English language. That's where you get this brogue or accent from. So then when Ireland became an Irish Free State, twenty-six counties, they wanted to get the language back, but it wasn't the original Gaelic. It was a new version and it's very, very—it's very difficult. It's one of the hardest languages to learn.

SIGRIST: I just had this mental image of your Gaelic-speaking grandmother married to your German grandfather. [Laughs] You know, this interesting clash of cultures.

LENNEY: That's right. That's right.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your grandmother speaking the old Gaelic?

LENNEY: I remember my grandmother. My grandmother lived with us.

SIGRIST: After your grandfather died?

LENNEY: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes. What—what sticks out in your mind about—about your mother's mother?

LENNEY: Sleeping in the same bed with her. I remember that, because we didn't have any more room. And I guess when I left, she was really devastated and I remember her smoking a pipe. My mother smoked a pipe. Yeah, they didn't think anything of it. Yeah, my grandmother was a very nice lady.

SIGRIST: Do you have any stories associated with your mother or your grandmother smoking a pipe?

LENNEY: Yes, I do.

SIGRIST: Would you tell us one?

LENNEY: When my mother came—

SIGRIST: [unclear]

LENNEY: My mother came to this country with her pipe. We brought her here for a visit back in, let me see, in the '70s, and she was visiting with me and one day I came home from work and she's sitting in the living

room and she has the pipe, and on the coffee table was a picture of the Pope. And she goes to the coffee table and she turns the picture upside down and I looked at her and I said, "Mother, why are you turning the Pope's picture upside down?" She said, "Well, I don't want the Pope to see my smokin'." [Laughs] And she thought that the people on TV were concealed. She believed that. She didn't think they—she thought they—and she behaved herself because my brother, Mike, who worked in the steel mill, would come home and he'd say, "Mother, what were you doin' last night? You know, I could see on TV all these actions that you were goin' through." [Laughs] So he haunted her and she believed it. She believed it.

SIGRIST: Well, of course, I assume they didn't have a TV in Ireland.

LENNEY: Oh, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: She hadn't seen that until she came here. Oh, that's—

LENNEY: No, but she liked it. She liked it.

SIGRIST: That's very funny.

LENNEY: She was seventy-six when she came for a visit and went back.

SIGRIST: Tell me, when you were growing up in Ireland, what did you know about America? How did you perceive—

LENNEY: America was the land of—what shall I say? Money grew on trees. That was the impression. Why, my aunts would come home and they seemed to be very comfortable and they had nice clothes, and

they never spoke about any of the problems in the States. It was always very, very rosy.

SIGRIST: When did they come to the United States?

LENNEY: When my two aunts that were in England, they stayed there for a while. I think when my mother got married, she had a dowry and when she came, moved in and married my father, the dowry that she brought in, which was maybe three or four hundred pounds, which was quite a bit of money in those days, Paul, then each one that was there got a little share and they brought—they came to this country. They brought each other. ----- brought each other.

SIGRIST: And where did they go when they came here?

LENNEY: New York City.

SIGRIST: And what did they do when they got there?

LENNEY: Ohhh. My Aunt Bea did—did domestic work. She was cooking. My Aunt Nellie did domestic work. My Aunt Annie worked in the telephone company. My Aunt Nora—most of them did domestic work. They didn't have that much education. There was only two or three of them that really pursued an education.

SIGRIST: So your father really had quite a bit of family here then in the United States, his sisters. There's a lot of—

LENNEY: He had all his family here. He had a brother—uncle—my Uncle Bill. He died when his mother was born. She she was only fifty years old. She died in childbirth.

SIGRIST: But your father or mother had never been to the United States?

LENNEY: No. My mother came with me.

SIGRIST: Right, but not before that.

LENNEY: No, no. We wanted my father to come, but he wouldn't. For some reason he didn't want to come.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me why you wanted to come.

LENNEY: I didn't. I didn't. It was all decided.

SIGRIST: And how did that happen?

LENNEY: When I was born, my Aunt Barbara came home. She was nursing in England. As a matter of fact, when my oldest brother was born, she came home and took care of my mother because my mother went into a toxemia, and she came home and took care of the house and everything. And then she went back and then—in the meantime, I think she had come to this country to visit. In the meantime, I was born. So then she went home and because I was a girl, I guess, she said to my father, she said, "I would like to take her to America when she's old enough, with your permission." So that was decided when I was three. Now, when all the arrangements were made, Paul, if I didn't want to stay in America, she was going to send me to that beautiful convent in Galway for my education, but she realized that if I stayed home, that if she sent money home, that they'd use it for other things and I wouldn't get an education. So that was all decided. I didn't have any say in it.

SIGRIST: How was this all presented to you, when you—

LENNEY: “You’re going to America,” and of course you thought you were great, you know. Everybody, all the neighbors would look, and, “Oh, she’s going to America. Isn’t that wonderful.” But it’s not so wonderful, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the process was of getting ready to leave?

LENNEY: Yes, the process—process is very, very long. It took almost a year. She had to show credentials that she was able to take care of me, that I wouldn’t become a burden to the State. You had to go to the American Consulate in Dublin and you had to go through an examination there, both a mental and physical. And then they decided. It took around approximately a year.

SIGRIST: And during that year, can you tell me a little bit about what’s going on inside of you? You know, what—what kind of—how are you feeling?

LENNEY: Anxiety, I would say but you see, you’re too young to realize, Paul, what—what’s happening. You know, you don’t know. You think it’s—well, you know, it’s just like any kid. You’re going to another country and you don’t know the repercussions, you really don’t. You don’t know what’s in store for you.

SIGRIST: And what—what did your aunt have planned for you, once you got here?

LENNEY: To go to school. And remember, she worked. She worked in a big hospital in New York City, Presbyterian. She went out every morning

at seven o'clock and got home at seven at night, and I was mostly alone.

SIGRIST: But what kind—you say that her intention was to put you into school, but I mean did she have a larger plan beyond that? I mean, a special kind of school or—

LENNEY: No.

SIGRIST: Just to give you a better education than in Ireland.

LENNEY: Better education. She felt I—

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your brothers felt about the opportunity?

LENNEY: I don't—I—my oldest brother was—well, he was older, but my younger brothers, they were young. See, Pat is four years younger than me. So they were very young when I left and I don't think they really understood.

[END OF SIDE A]      [BEGIN SIDE B]

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you packed to take with you to America?

LENNEY: Not very much.

SIGRIST: What was that, though?

LENNEY: Yeah, probably a little dress and a coat and a hat and shoes. That's it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember taking an object of some sort?

LENNEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Some sort of, maybe a bible or something like that?

LENNEY: Oh, yeah, I took my father's prayer book. That was it, and Rosary Beads.

SIGRIST: And did your aunt go back to Ireland? Who—oh, you said your mother traveled with you to America.

LENNEY: She came and stayed two weeks here and then went back.

SIGRIST: Was there some kind of gathering in Ireland prior to your leaving?

LENNEY: No. No. I don't remember any gathering, no.

SIGRIST: How did your father feel about you leaving? I mean, obviously, he arranged it I suppose.

LENNEY: He arranged it with my Aunt Barbara. They were very close with Aunt Barbara and I think he was very agreeable to the process or whatever.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to your father?

LENNEY: Oh, yeah, sure I do. Sure, right—he didn't come to the town. We came—we went to—we went to Ballina in a horse and buggy and I got on the train and that was it. We went to—first I had to go to Dublin and then came back and all the records had to be processed.

And then you got a notice to go and when to sail. So we had to go to Queenstown, or C  bh, and everywhere you went, Paul, you were under—you had to be checked. I was going—I was in the medical room ever --- all the time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if they were looking for something specifically?

LENNEY: Yeah, definitely. If you had any kind of problems or anything, they would not allow you to stay.

SIGRIST: What about the fact that your mother was traveling with you? I mean, did she have to undergo these kind of exam—

LENNEY: No.

SIGRIST: She was just going as a tourist.

LENNEY: Yeah, she was just going as my guardian.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about the trip to Queenstown?

LENNEY: It was long. [Laughs] A long, lonesome trip.

SIGRIST: You went by train.

LENNEY: We went by train, yeah. Even though Ireland isn't very big, it seems forever. [Laughs] Yeah, and I—

SIGRIST: Do --- do---- go ahead.

LENNEY: I remember getting on a small what we call a tender or a ferry and you got on that in the evening. That was the plan and they whisked you out to the ocean liner which was, I don't how many miles out on the ocean because it's not deep enough for the big ocean liners to come in. And we got onboard ship probably about seven or eight o'clock in the evening. Then you had a nice meal and the next morning when you were out in mid ocean, Ireland was gone, and there was a reason for that. Because people did not want to say goodbye, you know. It was all over by the time they got up in the morning. It was too emotional because a lot of them never went back again.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship?

LENNEY: The S.S. Manhattan.

SIGRIST: And had your mother—

LENNEY: Beautiful American ship.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the line? The ocean—the line?

LENNEY: Cunard. I think it was the Cunard.

SIGRIST: Was it the Cunard?

LENNEY: I think it was the Cunard. I think it's the Cunard. The Cunard is American.

SIGRIST: Had your mother ever been on a big ship before?

LENNEY: No, never.

SIGRIST: What did you feel like when you were getting into this big ship?  
What's it feel like to a thirteen-year-old girl?

LENNEY: Over—overwhelmed. [Laughs] Hungry. Overwhelmed. And when I  
---and my mother kept saying, “Now, don't eat too much because  
you'll get seasick. Don't eat too much.” So we didn't eat too much.  
We just had some soup and a little snacks and that's it. But a lot of  
people got seasick. It was sort of rough. Of course, it was in  
December.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the cabin area where you stayed?

LENNEY: The cabin? The cabin was very, very nice except it was rough that  
you were knocked from one side to the other or if you walked down  
the corridor, you couldn't walk a straight line. And I remember one  
night on when we were out in the middle of the ocean, all the  
dishes and the food and everything went flying off the table. It was  
exciting. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this?

LENNEY: December.

SIGRIST: This is in December of 1935.

LENNEY: December 1935. I landed here two days before Christmas.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your mother on this ocean voyage at all?

LENNEY: Oh, she was off saying the Rosary every day. She was scared to death. As a matter of fact, when we landed in New York City, the—the ship docked X number of miles outside the port of New York, and she's up at five o'clock in the morning screaming, "We're sinking. We're sinking," and everybody is going crazy and the steward comes up to her and says, "Mrs. Keane, we are not sinking. We have stopped to give the mail to the other ship that's going back. We are not sinking." But she had everybody—the whole ship alarmed.

SIGRIST: So she was a little nervous during —during the voyage.

LENNEY: She was difficult. It was very difficult.

SIGRIST: Did you see anything on the ship that you had never seen before, that was new to you in some way?

LENNEY: Well, the bathrooms and the bathtubs.

SIGRIST: How were they different than what you had been accustomed to?

LENNEY: Because I --- we didn't have a bathtub. We had one of those big basins, you know, Paul, Saturday night. We got a bath once a week. Got into the—my mother—we dragged the water. We had to heat it and we—right in front of the fireplace in the kitchen we all had to take our baths, once a week. Wash our hair and that's it. So the bathtubs were in ----and the—of course everything was very different. Very different.

SIGRIST: Do you remember having any interaction with the staff of the ship at all?

LENNEY: They were all very nice to me but I don't remember too much interaction. You know, I was shy. I mean shy or afraid and they'd ask you a question, half the time you'd answer, half the time you wouldn't because you didn't know what they were—you know, it was very difficult.

SIGRIST: Do you remember there being other young women of your age on the ship?

LENNEY: No. No.

SIGRIST: Did you just kind of keep with your mom?

LENNEY: Yeah, uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: How long did it take to get to New York?

LENNEY: Five days.

SIGRIST: Five days, and you told us the story about the ship docking outside of the port. What do you remember about it going into the Port of New York?

LENNEY: I remember going into the port and the American citizens were allowed off first, and then we were the—the immigrants and we had to stay. And I remember my Aunt Barbara on the pier and we could wave to her, and they said, "You have to go to Ellis Island," and it was sn — I'd never seen that much snow. It was snowing and it was bitter cold. Bitter cold.

SIGRIST: Is that different somehow than it would be in Ireland at that time of year?

LENNEY: Yeah, it doesn't get that cold in Ireland, Paul. You know, it's kind of a moderate temperature. Around—it never gets—once in a while it does, but not that cold. It usually stays in the forties or fifties, where here it gets subzero.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty prior to when the ship docked?

LENNEY: Ah, I sure do.

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about that?

LENNEY: It was beautiful. Yeah, very, very beautiful.

SIGRIST: Did you know what it was?

LENNEY: I think the captain of the ship explained that this was Statue of Liberty, if I can remember correctly, Paul.

SIGRIST: All right, so the ship docks and they don't let you off.

LENNEY: That's right.

SIGRIST: And they tell you you have to go to Ellis Island.

LENNEY: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Tell me what happens.

LENNEY: Well, I was—I was very upset and so was my Aunt Barbara and my mother was, but the—she, my mother could have gone off, could have gone off ship and gone with my aunt, but she chose to stay with me. So they bussed us from the dock to Ellis Island and then we had—you'd have to cross—we had to cross the ferry. We had to get on a ferry, too. There wasn't that many of us, though, and I remember getting there. It was probably in the afternoon, Paul, and they had huge benches. So you would sit on the bench. I can still see myself sitting on the bench and then you had to go through a routine of examinations. And it took a long time and it was the holidays and they were working with a skeleton crew.

SIGRIST: Was there a reason why you specifically had to go over? Were they—?

LENNEY: I have no idea why. I have no idea.

SIGRIST: And what did it look like?

LENNEY: Well, did you—have you seen the old one, old Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: My office is, so I did, but I want to know what you remember.

LENNEY: Oh, I remember just a great big room with all these people around and with their little suitcases and their bags and a lot of—a lot of poverty. That's all. It was very, very—very scary.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kind of examinations that you had to undergo?

LENNEY: I had to go through a—a mental examination, a written exam and then a physical.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what the mental examination entailed?

LENNEY: Well, they ask you, you know, different—read and your mathematics and some history and that's it. See how—you know, see if you were comprehending, or they give you something to read.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you slept at Ellis Island?

LENNEY: I didn't. We sat on the bench all night. We didn't sleep.

SIGRIST: Do you remember --- were you fed while you were there?

LENNEY: We were fed, yes, but I can't remember what. [Laughs] Probably had a cup of tea.

SIGRIST: Do you have any impressions of your mother's reaction to this whole experience while she's there with you and things that she might have said or observed?

LENNEY: Ah, I can't—I don't know what her reaction was. She was the type that would—would kind of downplay things, you know. Say, "It will be all right." You know, she was very religious. "Have faith. Have trust." That's the way it was.

SIGRIST: I was thinking, you know, if she were so anxious on the ship, you know, might—might that have also carried over to—to [unclear].

LENNEY: Yeah. No, she was good on—I think she was on land, you see. She wasn't on water, so that made a difference.

SIGRIST: That's why the Rosary Beads could be back into her pocket.

LENNEY: Oh, the Rosary Beads.

SIGRIST: Is there anything else you can remember about being on the Island that sticks out in your mind? Things that you might have seen that made an impression on you? Maybe the types of people that you saw.

LENNEY: People. People. People, they looked so—well, so anxious about everything. They didn't know, you see. It's not easy. It's very difficult and you don't realize it until you go through it. So we could relate to one another, and I was too young really to relate to some of these adults and to me I think it was just a euphoric thing, that I was coming to another country. That's the kid of it, but these people were coming to hopefully find a job and work. That was their purpose, but that wasn't mine. Mine was come to school and I had a choice, if I didn't want to stay here, I could have gone back, but they didn't—

SIGRIST: Oh, you meant going back to the—or going to attend the convent in Galway.

LENNEY: Exactly. Exactly, you see. So mine—my situation was a lot different.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you were released from the Island?

LENNEY: My Aunt Barbara came and signed some papers and she had to declare responsibility.

SIGRIST: And where did your Aunt Barbara take you?

LENNEY: She took me to her apartment up on West—we lived in—they lived on 158<sup>th</sup> Street then up in Washington Heights. It was a very, very nice—we lived on the sixth floor. Elevator apartment, and it was kind of—it was a very nice apartment, very plush.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any impressions of New York City that—that—

LENNEY: So busy and all the Black people.

SIGRIST: Had you ever seen a Black person before?

LENNEY: Never had seen a Black person.

SIGRIST: What did you think?

LENNEY: I said, “Well, where do they come from?” [Laughs] I was afraid. I was afraid. As a matter of fact, when we got out of Ellis Island, we took the subway from downtown New York up to Washington Heights.

SIGRIST: And was that the first time you’d been on a subway?

LENNEY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt about that experience?

LENNEY: I said, “How are we going to get out of this place?” [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Tell me about when you got to Aunt Barbara—was Aunt Barbara married?

LENNEY: No.

SIGRIST: No, she lived by herself.

LENNEY: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did you spend that first night?

LENNEY: We—they had all the family there and it was near Christmas and they had a Christmas party and she had invited Aunt Annie and her husband and Uncle Willie and all of them came to see the new immigrant. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Remember how you felt about being put on display?

LENNEY: I didn't like it, to be honest with you. [Laughs] I didn't like it, but I was on display for a couple of days. But I was registered in school right away.

SIGRIST: That was going to be my next question. How—when—when were you registered and what do you remember about—

LENNEY: The next week I was taken to St. Catherine's of Genoa, which is on West 152<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York City, and we had the Sisters of Mercy and I was in—well, I was in a trial basis. I was in fifth grade and so I started right away in school, and I loved it. But when I'd get up to recite, the kids would laugh at me because of my brogue and the nuns—there was a couple of nuns there who were from Ireland and

they'd say, "Don't you laugh at her. She's from Ireland. Don't you laugh at her brogue. Don't you laugh at her." So they were very caring and I did okay, Paul.

SIGRIST: Why did Aunt Barbara choose that school?

LENNEY: Because she lived near there. We were only six blocks. I walked to school every day.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember any difficulties in your adjustment in those first couple of weeks when you were in school, other than the kids laughing at your brogue?

LENNY: the kids ---

SIGRIST: I mean, was there any other kind of difficult situations where you—

LENNEY: It's because I spoke English, I --- there wasn't too much, Paul, you know. There wasn't too much.

SIGRIST: How long did your mom stay?

LENNEY: Two weeks.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what your life was like after your mother went back?

LENNEY: Um, I was very lonesome. I don't think I realized that she was gone, you know, but I was—kept busy at school and then I had to work in the house, do the cleaning. You didn't dare use the bathtub without

scrubbing it out. I scrubbed the floors. I'd do the dishes, all that stuff. Do my homework. But I was—

SIGRIST: Were you writing to your parents?

LENNEY: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Did you—

LENNEY: Sure, I wrote to them all the time, yes.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What kinds of things were they writing back to you about their life? Do you remember?

LENNEY: Telling me about my mother. Telling me about my brothers and about—my father would write to me and tell me what was going on. What was going on with the neighbors and some of the friends that I had left that I was in school with because I was close to a couple. They never corresponded with me. My friends never corresponded.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the kinds of things you were writing to them? You know, what was the—what was important to you at that time?

LENNEY: Not very much. Not very much. Told them about school. They wouldn't understand, anyway. Tell them about Aunt Barbara going to work or Uncle Willie came to see me and "I went to So and So's house," or something like that. That was it.

SIGRIST: What were some of your mother's impressions of New York during that two weeks?

LENNEY: She didn't say. I think she'd like to have stayed. I think she would.

SIGRIST: Well, you brought her back—she came back many years later to visit.

LENNEY: Oh, yeah, several years later. I was married. I had my children. Yeah. As a matter of fact, Paul, we wanted to bring them. After I finished school, I brought my two brothers and we wanted my parents to come and settle here. There was a place up in Hagaman, New York, a farm that belonged to my father's half-sister and we wanted to get that for them, but they wouldn't come. I wish they did, but they didn't. Because most of my father's family were here.

SIGRIST: That's right.

LENNEY: Most of his, and my mother had only one brother and she didn't have too much communication with him.

SIGRIST: Why wouldn't they leave Ireland, do you think?

LENNEY: I have no idea, Paul. I don't know. I think they were just fearful.

SIGRIST: They were afraid of the unknown.

LENNEY: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was the first time you went back to Ireland?

LENNEY: In 1947.

SIGRIST: So you'd been here—

LENNEY: Twelve years.

SIGRIST: Twelve years. Tell me what it was like to go back that next time.

LENNEY: Terrible.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the circumstances?

LENNEY: Well, after I finished school—my Aunt Barbara went home in the meantime, though, and my parents were angry that she went home and left me here.

SIGRIST: She went home to live?

LENNEY: Went home to visit.

SIGRIST: Oh, to visit.

LENNEY: She had friends over there.

SIGRIST: I see.

LENNEY: That she went to school with in England, and then she --- naturally she went home and my parents were—they wanted to know why I didn't come with her. But she said, "When you go back again, you'll pay your own way." I said, "Okay, I will." So I finished school. I graduated in '46 from nursing school and I worked a year, Paul, and earned my passage, as they say, and I went back on the Queen Elizabeth and we docked in South Hampton. I was on the British ship, the Queen Elizabeth in the middle of the ocean on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July with a bunch of crazy Americans and did we party. You know,

that was really something. So we docked in Southampton. My Aunt Mary brought us to her home and she had a beautiful home in Surrey, England, and it was right after World War II, Paul, and there was so much devastation in London, it was pitiful. My Aunt Mary's husband took me on a tour of London and we went—I went to see Aunt Barbara's hospital, St. Bartholomew's. I went to St. Mary's and the food was so scarce that the shelves were stocked with American goods, but my Aunt Mary said they won the war, with "a little help from those crazy Yanks." See, the English have no use for the Americans. They really don't and her feeling was that the English—the American soldiers destroyed their beautiful English girls. I said, "Aunt Mary, why can't you—why can you—why do you say that?" I said, "You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the Americans." "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. We won the war. We won the war." So there was a lot of animosity.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in Surrey before you went over to Ireland?

LENNEY: A week. A week.

SIGRIST: And when you went over, did you go back to the farmhouse where you had grown up?

LENNEY: Yes, I certainly did.

SIGRIST: How did that make you feel to see that again?

LENNEY: Terrible. The devastation was terrible. There was so much poverty. I had—I—I had a suit—I had some clothes in my suitcase, Paul, that I would not take out because there was so much—they didn't have anything. Even though they weren't involved in the war, they didn't

have any—to have light in the house. They couldn't get kerosene. They were sca ---everything was so scarce. My father grew sugar beets, which they didn't have the proper refine—refining system for and they didn't have—they had very little flour. My brothers didn't have any—there was very little clothing because they couldn't get the fabric. There was nothing, there was so much poverty.

SIGRIST: How did it make you feel emotionally to see your childhood home again?

LENNEY: It was emotional, yeah, but it was good. It was good to see everybody.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay?

LENNEY: Two months.

SIGRIST: Two months?

LENNEY: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

LENNEY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And I'm just curious, how did your—did your parents treat you any differently?

LENNEY: Oh, yes, I was—

SIGRIST: Having been to America.

LENNEY: Oh, yes. I was like a queen, but I didn't want any of that. I really didn't. [Dog barking] And I went out and I was very—my Aunt Barbara came back with me then. She was with me, and I walked, you know, around and visited different people and I was glad to see everybody.

SIGRIST: Did your aunts ever become citizens?

LENNEY: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: American citizens?

LENNEY: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yes. Did you become a citizen?

LENNEY: Yes, you have to, to become—to take your State boards. See, when my Aunt Barbara left England and came to this country to work here, she had to take State boards.

SIGRIST: Meaning nursing boards?

LENNEY: Nursing boards.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Can you describe for me the process of becoming a citizen? What you had to go through?

LENNEY: What I had to go? Well, of course, I love America. They asked you—I had to apply for my citizen papers when I was eighteen or nineteen.

SIGRIST: So you hadn't really been here just a few years.

LENNEY: Right.

SIGRIST: When this happened.

LENNEY: But I had studied American history in school, in high school and I got a good mark in it, too, because I loved it. And then we went down to the courthouse in Lower Manhattan and I was before the judge and they ask you questions. They want to know what the House of rep --- who was the first President? How is the House of Representatives selected? How many people were in Congress and all that stuff. And I had to get my citizen papers before I took State boards. You were not allowed to take State boards unless you're an American citizen because there was one girl that was in training with me from England. She was a year ahead of me at Roosevelt and her father was a colonel in the army and he brought his family here during the war years for protection, and when she finished, they wanted her to become a citizen. She says, "No, I'm not giving up my English citizen. I'm going back to England to practice my nursing," and now when you go over there, they don't recogni ---- not recognize us either because my Aunt Mary wanted me to stay in England and work there in the hospitals. I would have to go through the whole procedure again, Paul.

SIGRIST: So you actually—not only did you have to study for the boards, but I guess you had to study to get the citizenship and then—

LENNEY: Right, and then if I wanted to—my brothers wanted me to stay home and work in Dublin. Now, if I worked in Dublin, I had to learn Gaelic.

SIGRIST: That was a requirement.

LENNEY: That's mandated. Anything. Anything you do in Ireland it's mandated, and learn all your medical terminology and everything in Gaelic and then take State boards, and take State boards in Gaelic. So it's not easy.

SIGRIST: No.

LENNEY: No, especially when you go into the professions. You know, your doctors, your lawyers. I worked with a Dr. Caufield [PH] here at Siena College who is from Ireland. He had his training in Galway and he was in Vermont and he said, "Mary Joe, I had to go through all that stuff," and he was here twenty years when he finally got his State boards.

SIGRIST: What—what part of you do you think is truly Irish? What part of your personality is typical of someone from Ireland?

LENNEY: I think my religion, Paul, and caring, I think. You know, I care about people. Of course, that's obvious because I went into a profession where you care for people.

SIGRIST: And how long did you nurse or are you still—

LENNEY: Oh, I'm still involved. Yes.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

LENNEY: Yeah, fifty years. I graduated in four --- I'm fifty years out of nursing.

SIGRIST: Do you—do you think of yourself as being Irish or as being American? How do you think of yourself in terms of—?

LENNEY: You never—you never forget your homeland. You never forget your birth—birth land, but I'm loyal to America. I would never—I would never think of going back there. My children are here. Their roots are here. My roots are really here, but I love my homeland. I really do, but there isn't anybody there now, Paul. Everybody is gone. I was there this past April and everybody is gone.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Lenney, thank you very much for letting me come out and ask you all these questions.

LENNEY: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: About coming from Ireland. This is Paul—

LENNEY: It was sweet of you.

SIGRIST: Oh, it was my pleasure. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Mary Joe Lenney on Wednesday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1996 here in Cohoes, New York. Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW

EI-793/LENNEY