

KECK-182/FLAHERTY
BIRTH DATE: UNKNOWN
INTERVIEW DATE: 5/29/1986
RUNNING TIME: 15:00
INTERVIEWER: Debra Allee
RECORDING ENGINEER: NANCY DALLETT
INTERVIEW LOCATION: UNKNOWN
TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA,
TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: UNKNOWN
TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED: UNKNOWN

IRELAND, 1923
AGE 16

PASSAGE ON "ADRIATIC"

ALLEE: This is Debra Allee. I'm speaking with Johanna Flaherty on Thursday, May 29, 1986. We're beginning this interview at 3:40 PM. We're interviewing Mrs. Flaherty about her immigration from Ireland in 1923. Okay. Why don't we begin at the beginning in Ireland, what life was like there and why you came her.

FLAHERTY: I'm a little bit deaf, if you could speak a tiny bit louder.

ALLEE: Oh, okay. Why don't we begin at the beginning

FLAHERTY: Yes.

ALLEE: When you were growing up in Ireland. What it was like, and why you decided to come here.

FLAHERTY: Well, I was born in Newcastle West, County Limerick. And when I grew up, I went to school to Ardara. I was about maybe seven years of age when I started school in Ardara because we moved there. Then I continued on in school, in Ardara, to the seventh grade. And after the seventh grade there was really nothing in Ireland for me. I wasn't educated enough to take, you know, an office job or anything. And my father could not afford to send me to, business schools or to college. There was no high schools there in those days. I believe they have them now. But in those days we had no high school. So I stayed on in the seventh grade for about three years, just teaching the kindergarten you would call them, that come in. I used to teach that class. For two years I taught them. And then in the evenings I went to the boy's school after the, regular classes went out. The schoolmaster took a few of us for algebra and geometry

and, uh, business English. So I took them three courses after school. And I also came back to night school for Gaelic. So, uh Then in 1920, my aunt was home, my father's sister. And she said to me, "What are you going to do here? There's no jobs for you." So I said, "Well, I don't know. I really don't know, Auntie Ann." So she says. "I'll tell you." Just, her brother then, was coming to this country after his mother would pass away.

She was very ill. So she said, "Why don't you come to America with Uncle Patty?" And I, she had no children, so she was going to take me. And she said, "I'll send you to school and, uh, you'll get a job over there and you can help your parents." So that's how I came to this country. So then, in 1923, my uncle and I started out for this country. We went to Queenstown and, it was some time in July, I can't remember the exact date. It was either the 24th or 27th of July that we went on board, the Adriatic. And we landed in the dock here about, I'd say, either the first or second of August. Oh, no.

Couldn't be, because that would be too short a time.

No we boarded earlier than that in Queenstown. I can't remember the exact date.

ALLEE: That's okay.

FLAHERTY: But anyway, we landed down in the dock about the first or second of August. Not in the dock, but outside. They kept us all out because there was about seven boats out there and we couldn't come in until each boat had to be cleared through Ellis Island. So I remember the Majestic being there, the Cameronia was there I can't remember the others. And I was on the Adriatic. So I'm, Friday evening we were brought into the dock. And we were put in two small boats, because they wanted to get the Adriatic ready to sail out again on Saturday. So they put us on two smaller boats, and then on Saturday morning they took us, by ten, small tender, to Ellis Island. And that's where we went through our examination on Ellis Island.

ALLEE: You can go back a little, to Ireland, as you're getting ready for the trip. How did you feel about coming here?

FLAHERTY: Oh, I was all excited.

ALLEE: Had you read about it? Had people been telling you about

it?

FLAHERTY: No, I hadn't, except what, uh, my aunts. There were some of my aunts home at different times because my father had four sisters in this country and about four or five of his brothers. And every once in a while somebody would take a trip home to visit their father and mother. The father was dead, at that time, but the mother was still living. So, I mean, all you would hear about America was what they would tell you, or what you would read in the newspaper. That's really all I knew about America.

ALLEE: Was there anything you remembered that--

FLAHERTY: I remember visualizing, in Ireland, that my aunt had a great big house. I thought it was like an estate, because she told me she lived at 345 Third Avenue. Now, to me an avenue was a winding driveway going into a big estate, like. You've seen them here, you know, in the country. That to me was, that's what we called an avenue at home. The street, Third Avenue, we would call a street, just a plain street. So when I came here and we got off the El and we walked to Third Avenue, I was

really disappointed. I thought, "Well. where's the avenue she was talking about?"

ALLEE: Um did you, do you remember what you brought with you, or what you

FLAHERTY: Just my clothes. That was about all. That was it.

ALLEE: And, uh, what was the trip like?

FLAHERTY: The trip wasn't bad, but we were down in steerage. Now, that's the bottom of the boat, absolute bottom. And you could not open your window because the water was, you were like under water. It was splashing up against the porthole the whole time. And we had bunk beds, of course. And, uh, the food was good, pretty good. But I was sick most of the way across. I was seasick. And I really didn't care if I ever saw food. Just a glass of ginger ale. That was all I really wanted. I just to. Then I'd go upstairs and lay down on the deck and roll my coat up and put it under my head and I'd sleep there half the day. I was real very sick. But what made us worse was on our way down to our bunks we had to pass the

kitchen. And the smell of that cooking food, it used to make us nauseous, because we were nauseous anyway.

ALLEE: Was it stormy, or was it just rolling waves?

It was beautiful, gorgeous. The sea was like glass at that time.

ALLEE: You were feeling seasick anyway. And when you came into the Harbor, did you see the Statue of Liberty at all?

FLAHERTY: We did, but it seemed very far. When we first came in we saw a glimpse of it. Somebody pointed it out to us on the deck. But it seemed like away in the distance, and it was kind of foggy. Pardon me. So we don't get much of a look at it. And the only time we really saw it was Saturday, when we were going to Ellis Island. The we got a good view of the Statue of Liberty. And they told us that, that was the Statue that was presented to the United States by France. So that was about all we learned about it at that time. I have read about it since.

ALLEE: Yes. So, on Ellis Island itself, how long were you there?

LAHERTY: Well we all went into Ellis Island, and we were lined up and we had to go up, they had cages there like you would see in a bank and there was, like, somebody behind each window. And, uh, we had to go up and he, my uncle and I, went up together. And he said to my uncle, "You can go." You know, looked at his papers, he said, "you can go." So he looked at my papers and I said, "Wait for me Uncle Patty." So he said, "All right." So then he looked at my papers, and he said, "oh, you can't go." I said, "Why?" He said. "Well," he said, "you're not eighteen." an he said, "you're a minor. Somebody will have to pick you up, sign for you." "oh," I said, "my uncle will be here." I said, "She told me she will be here." So he said, "Would you know your aunt?" I said, "Yes, I would." So he said, "All right, go back over there and sit down." So then we had to go back on these long benches and sit. And there were, oh, it seemed like maybe fifty to a hundred people sitting there. Some of them didn't speak any English. They just had signs on them like with their names. And, uh, I didn't speak to anybody because they were all chattering away in their own language, you know, and I didn't understand them. So

I just kept to myself. So after a while I guess he saw that I was kind of down in the dumps and he called me and he said, "Who's calling for you?" I said, "My aunt." He said, "Well, would you know her?" And I said, "Yes, I would." He says, "If she came to the window now, would you know who she is?" I said, "There she is right behind you." She was standing at the other side of the window.

So he said, "Oh, all right, you can go with her." So she had come in and probably pointed me out to him, and then he knew that she knew me and I knew her. So then we

ALLEE: So you were just there a few hours?

FLAHERTY: Yeah. Maybe about two hours or so.

ALLEE: Do you remember what the place looked like?

FLAHERTY: Terrible.

ALLEE: It was terrible?

FLAHERTY: I thought it was terrible. The only part I saw was this great big assembly room where we sat, and it looked to me

like there was nothing there, only stools for people to sit on. Evidently there were ladies rooms and so forth there, but I didn't look for anything. I only just looked at the stool and I thought to myself, oh, dear God, how long am I going to be here. But, uh, it wasn't bad. Not too bad.

ALLEE: Did the other people seem frightened, or tense?

FLAHERTY: No, no. There were a lot of women. They had their children with them. Babies, and younger children running around.

ALLEE: On the boat itself, were the people all Irish, or was there a mixture?

FLAHERTY: Oh, there was a lot of Irish on there. There were some mixtures, not too many, though. There were some English and some Irish probably, I don't know what the others were. I think that boat started out from England, so it would be mostly English and Irish that were on there. Probably started off from Liverpool.

ALLEE: Okay. So you came here and you didn't find any avenue.

FLAHERTY: No. No avenue. That disappointed me. And another thing, we got on the El and we're sitting there riding. Auntie says, "You have a little ride home," she says. "Maybe about twenty minutes." Just from South Ferry up to 25th Street. That was how far we had to ride. So I looked around and I saw everybody on the train was chewing. They were chewing, chewing, and I couldn't imagine how come everybody's chewing and nobody's putting anything in their mouth. What are they eating? So a few days later I learned what it was, chewing gum, but I wouldn't dare ask my aunt. I wouldn't make believe I was that stupid. But I didn't know what they were chewing. (They laugh.)

ALLEE: What did you think of the city, your first view of New York, of Manhattan?

FLAHERTY: The city was kind of, I thought it was terrifying, those large buildings. It seemed like they were just about to close in on you. Statue t I got used to it very fast. I liked it.

ALLEE: And so when you came did you go to school?

FLAHERTY: Yes. I went to Merchant's & Banker's Business School, 50th Street and Madison Avenue. I went there for a year, and then I graduated. And after I graduated I got a job with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. And I worked there for thirteen years. And I got married, had three children. And, uh, then I didn't go back to work until, my last job was in high school. So then I went back to work again just, you know, to help out a little bit. And I went to work for Spotless Dry Cleaners. Did you ever hear of them?

ALLEE: Oh, sure.

FLAHERTY: Well, I was the manager for one of them stores. And I went from that to St. Barnabus Hospital. And I worked there for about fourteen years, and that's where I retired from. I retired when I was 72.

ALLEE: What did you do for St. Barnabus?

FLAHERTY: I was award clerk. I worked with the nurses and doctors

in the office.

ALLEE: So you just did office work the whole time.

FLAHERTY: Yes. Mostly office work. Pardon?

ALLEE: At Metropolitan Life also?

FLAHERTY: All office work. Filing and typing and all different things connected with the office.

ALLEE: Did anything in particular seem different here, aside from the chewing gum, than in Ireland? Once you got to know people.

FLAHERTY: No. No. It didn't really. I'll tell you one thing that struck me the day we landed, and I told this to the other fellow. When my aunt got dinner on Saturday after we came back from Ellis Island, she cooked about, I think there was four or five of us, she cooked about eight or ten potatoes. And I looked and I thought, "Oh, gosh, she must be stingy." Because when we cook potatoes in Ireland we cook a great big tray of potatoes like that,

put them up in the middle of the table, everybody grabs their own, they peeled it and mashed it on their plate with butter and so forth. And, uh, I thought, that many potatoes for so many of us. I found out after that there was plenty of other stuff to eat besides. Not that we didn't have other stuff in Ireland. We did. But what they did in Ireland, after you finish with the dinner, they picked up the whole thing and mixed up with meal for the chickens, the hens, and chickens, and that's what they fed them. So that's why they cooked so much potatoes. But I didn't realize that at that time. (They laugh.)

ALLEE: I'm trying to think, uh, did you like it when you came here?

FLAHERTY: Oh, yes. Very much. I had a lot of cousins my own age. I had about maybe six or seven cousins my own age at that time. And they took me everywhere, you know, to see all different things. The first day we went to Coney Island, oh, I really enjoyed that. I loved going there. And I had a hot dog. I thought, "my gosh, what is this?" I would call it a sausage. But they kept calling

them hot dogs. I liked it, grew to like them, and still like them. (she laughs.)

ALLEE: Did you ever sort of contrast what, in your mind, what your life in Ireland would have been like compared to what your life was

FLAHERTY: No. I was never, I was never once sorry that I left Ireland. I would love to live in Ireland, and I still would love to live in Ireland, but you haven't got the convenience there. The, uh, the jobs aren't there. There's no jobs there for the younger people. And now that they're others have stopped emigration. It's very hard on the Irish people, because they can't come here like they used to. But, uh, I loved to go back for a visit. I go back every year. In fact, I'm going back the 22nd of August. So, uh, I don't know. I love it over there, for a vacation, as I say, but I wouldn't want to stay. And then I think the winters over there are very cold. As my brother, I said I would love to go home one time at, uh, Christmas. My brother said, "Jo, don't ever come home at Christmas." He said, "You would freeze to

death here." They had no

ALLEE: Here? Colder

FLAHERTY: It's a damp, very damp, It's raining most of the time. Now, we were over there last summer and it rained practically every day we were there at some time. You'd get a shower in the morning, and it would clear up beautiful for the afternoon. It was beautiful in the morning, you'd get a shower around noontime. And, uh, it's a showery, it's a small island, and I think those showers blow in off the Atlantic, But, uh, if you get good weather over there it's good. Really good.

ALLEE: The showers kept it green.

FLAHERTY: Oh, sure. That's what keeps it green, the forty shades of green. (She laughs.)

ALLEE: Uh, did you become a citizen?

FLAHERTY: Yes. I went down. I was here a week and I went down for naturalization, see if I could become a citizen. So he

told me, he said, "How old are you?" So I said, "I'm, I'll be 17 in a couple of weeks." So he said, "Nope, come back to us after you're 18." Oh, I was disgusted. Because I wanted to become a citizen right away. And I went back. I didn't go back then, I didn't go back until, oh, I guess I was 25 or 26 before I I just never got back there. But I was very interested in all the Irish stuff. Not yet, the American stuff. The first thing I wanted to learn was the pledge of allegiance, the Star Spangled Banner, and everything about America. I wanted to learn it right away. And would you believe-- I worked in the Metropolitan, we had about eight girls on the team. And I asked each one. "Will you please write me the words of the national anthem?" Not one of them could write it. I was amazed. If anybody asked me when I was five or six years old for the Irish anthem I could write it. But not one of them. You know where I finally got it, in a box of Fannie Farmer candies. (They laugh.) It was on the inside, the national anthem, and the flag.

ALLEE: Was there anything else you wanted to see here that you hadn't seen, or do?

FLAHERTY: No. No. I had traveled quite a bit. My husband and I, we had no children for five years, and then we travelled most of the time, when he was on vacation. Of course, he had to work.

ALLEE: And you met him here in New York?

FLAHERTY: Yes. And he was from home. In fact, our families knew each other at home, but we never met. But we met here, in this country.

ALLEE: And did you, uh, did you bring your children up here in Queens?

FLAHERTY: No, in the Bronx. Washington Avenue. Are you familiar with the Bronx?

ALLEE: Yeah. I think I know where Washington Avenue is.

FLAHERTY: Washington Avenue. 181st Street and Washington Avenue. I lived there for about 30 years. We belonged to Our Savior Parish. The kids were all brought up in Our Savior school, and then they went to Catholic schools

after that. They're all married now and have their own children. Except Mary here has no children. And I have one son married in Saddle River, and he's becoming a lawyer June 15th, hopefully. And John lives in Bayside and he works for Edison, he's a computer analyst. And then Mary and her husband here, they both work for Edison. So (Speaking off tape.)

ALLEE: Did you feel, when you were here, part of an Irish community here, or did you feel more like part of the melting pot?

FLAHERTY: Oh, well, I liked, I did go to anything that was Irish. They had Irish festivals or concerts or anything I went to them, yes. But I was equally interested in the American, anything that was American, too. I went to it.

ALLEE: Did you try to, uh, preserve any Irish customs for your children?

FLAHERTY: Yes, I did.

ALLEE: What ones in particular?

FLAHERTY: Dancing. Irish step dancing. I took them to Irish step dancing. My daughter lasted through two lessons. (They laugh.) My son just went in, took one look at it, said, "That's not for me, Ma." (They laugh.) That was it.

ALLEE: But you liked it.

FLAHERTY: My husband and I were great dancers, but, uh, no go for them. They wouldn't do it.

ALLEE: Well, I think that's You've been very clear and very complete. So thank you.

FLAHERTY: You're welcome. I'm mighty glad I came here. God bless America, is all I can say.

ALLEE: This is the end of Interview 182 with Johanna (doneFlaherty. It is now four o'clock.