

Mary Kearney & Bessie Conway (Farnsworth House)
Interviewed by Quintin Johnson and Ibrahim Diarra (2003)

(Mary and Bessie were sisters. Bessie was very hard-of-hearing, so we interviewed both sisters at once so Mary could assist with the answers. There is some overlap between the interviews even though the sisters are different ages.)

Mary

My name is Mary A Kearney. I grew up in County Mayo, Ireland. I was born on March 14, 1912, so I'm 91 years old. When I was a child, I lived in the country, not the city. My childhood was like any other, I suppose. We played a lot outside. I use to play with the boys— kickball and other games. I went to the eighth grade. Not many children went to high school at that time. After school we'd have to work, but it wasn't bad. We were always pretty happy.

We could go out with our friends when we were teens, but we couldn't go too far. On bicycles, it would take an hour to ride to the next town. For entertainment we could go to dances. People played live music for the dances. It was a lot of fun. Sometimes we would have a dance at someone's house, and we might stay up dancing until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning! And when people would come back from America to visit, everyone would get together and have a dance.

People left because there wasn't much money there. They moved here so they could get jobs and make some money.

I never got in trouble as a child ... but we did have all the sicknesses that went around. We got measles, and flu, colds, pneumonia, and everything else. We very seldom had a doctor, but we'd get the castor oil and Epsom salts for remedies. Your mother was the doctor! (laughter)

What was going on in the world at that time? Well the First World War happened when I was very young. I remember that. Then, during the Second World War I lived and worked in England. I was in the north of England, in Manchester. We used to have air raids and we'd have to go inside, underground at night and turn out the lights. That war lasted six years. When it came to the end, Hitler, killed himself. That was after America came into the war. Imagine what would have happened if they hadn't??

I came to this country in 1956. And the biggest adventure of my life was when I got married. When I married my husband, he was a widower, and he had four young sons. At that time they were ten, eleven, thirteen and fourteen. My husband had lived in England, and his first wife died suddenly. I had known Jack in Ireland when I was younger because we grew up together. He was a few years older than me. Then I didn't see him for all those years. I went back from here for a visit, and I met him again and met his boys, and just like that we got married. So two of the boys were in grammar school, and two were in high school. Then we came back over here. And they

all went to school at St. Thomas' over there right across the street.

Then we had the Vietnam War, and all four of them were in the service at that time. They all came back— we were very lucky. Their names are Hugh, John Patrick, Michael, and Mark Kearney. When they came back, they all went to college. One is a psychologist, and he teaches in college. They're all married now, and doing very well.

I love to drive my car. That's one of my favorite things to do. I have a Cutlass Sierra. I like to drive to the beaches, sometimes to Nantasket Beach or to Cape Cod. I've never had an accident or got a speeding ticket. I'm a very good driver. I'll tell you how I learned to drive. When I came over to America Bessie was working for a family here in Jamaica Plain. Mrs. Grossman, the woman Bessie worked for, had a car she didn't drive very much. So they sent me for driving lessons. I remember the fellow came to pick me up for the driving lessons, and he said put your foot on the clutch. I said "What?" Because back home in Ireland, a clutch was a "clutch of eggs." Then they sold me the car for one dollar. So that's how I got my first car!

I've always been a very happy person, and I've enjoyed my life without regrets. I've also been lucky to have very good health. What advice could I give you? Well, I think that getting an education is the most important thing you can do for yourself. I told that to my boys, and they all turned out very well.

Bessie

My full name is Elizabeth Conway. And my nickname is Bessie. I got that name from my grandparents. I was born in County Mayo, Ireland, in 1906. I've lived here since 1925. When I first came to the United States, I lived in Philadelphia.

Where I grew up in Ireland, we lived in farm country, so we had cattle, chickens, things like that. And we walked everywhere. The nearest town was three miles on one side, and six miles on the other side, so we did a lot of walking. When we got a little older, we got bicycles. But, mostly we walked. That's why we're still living!

We had a lot of rain where we lived, and that was good because it was farm country. We didn't have sheep, we had cattle, horses, and chickens. On the farm we grew potatoes, carrots, turnips, string beans, cabbage, and such. We had dogs and cats for pets. I had a cat named Sammy.

The houses were close together, and the farmland was out in back. There were six children in our family, two girls and four boys. I was the oldest, then we had two brothers, then Mary, then two more brothers. Only five of us grew up because my oldest brother died when he was five and a half years old.

We went to the eighth grade in school. It was called grammar school. We went from 9:00 in the morning to 3:00 in the afternoon. We didn't get to go to high school. When we got out of school, we worked on the farm, working in the fields and taking care of

the animals. My favorite season is summertime, my favorite music is Irish music, and my favorite color is green!

When we grew up, there were lots of children to play with since we all lived close together, and there were children in almost every house. We had our brothers and all of the children who lived around us. A lot of us moved to America eventually, and we knew each other over here, too.

We didn't have telephones or televisions back then. Most people played music for entertainment. So we played jigs and reels, we didn't play instruments ourselves, but we would sing.

After I got out of school, I emigrated to this country when I was just 18 years old. When I came to Boston, I worked for a family here in Jamaica Plain. Then I lived with my sister, Mary, on Custer Street for a long time before we moved here to Farnsworth House.