

Interview of Justice Florence K. Murray by Museum of Newport Irish History member in 2001 at La Forge Casino Restaurant, Bellevue Avenue, Newport, RI. Transcribed by Marian Mathison Desrosiers in 2010.

1. How did you go into public office?

When I was in the Women's Army Corps I was assigned to the Pentagon and attended Washington D. C. political meetings. I was young, a bit of a feminist you could say. I noted the lack of qualifications for political office in those who were in office. This was an aspect of appointing authorities. However you can't complain if you don't compete and get into the ring.

How did I toss my hat in the ring?

Someone encouraged me. Someone does something for you that perhaps you could have done for yourself. My father was my oracle. I asked him what I should do, and he said that if I wanted to have a law practice, politics was one way to make your name known. So in 1948 I ran for Newport School Committee and for state senate.

I told this story to former Mayor of Newport Bob McKenna, that one of the most interesting parts of campaigning was getting up onto a truck and speaking extemporaneously in the campaign.

2. What are your memories of your Irish relatives?

Through the sheriff who was appointed to service with me on the court in 1956, John Conway, who was a Son of Erie, I was asked to give some talks on Irish heritage. I learned that genealogy is not for the short winded or impatient.

I traveled to Ireland with my ten-year-old son in 1961 to Clare. I met my grandfather's family. He was one of nine sisters and brothers and they were the children of an innkeeper in Clare. He had been in the Easter Rebellion (1916) just before I was born. I was amazed at how well educated the family was; they were products of Christian Brothers schools.

3. Why did your relatives come to Newport?

I believe that relatives seek out other family members who could give them economic support to get started here. I also think the climate and job opportunities were similar. In Lisdoonvarna, County Clare, the climate seems similar near the Atlantic Ocean. My relatives came to Newport and became gardeners, maintenance people, and entrepreneurs. I know that two of them started a surrey carriage business in the 1880s.

Where I grew up in the Fifth Ward, people had brains and drive, seeking to improve themselves. In my 50-year perspective of the Fifth War bigotry had no sanction.

I think the strength of America is in the ethnic groups that came here. Although some people used their ethnicity to get into political life.

4. What do you remember about your Irish ancestors in Newport?

My relatives sought an education first. Some did enter public office as well.

I did find out that the name Kerins should be Kerin. Nancy Shepley Lacey told me that. In the old catholic cemetery there is a gravestone of a relative and the name is spelled Kerin.

The Irish who came to Newport came with a lot to give and took advantage of every opportunity. One relative started the Newport Gardeners Association, another formed a group called the Disabled Veterans. My childhood in Newport was a rich one where I remember family encouraged each other.

4. Do you remember specific role models?

Chief Edward Sullivan of Newport was years ahead of his time in his emphasis on prevention and helping those in trouble with the law. He knew how to exercise discretion.

Then there was Hannah Hickey Hammond, whose son was my godfather. she brought up her two sons as a widow. She was a dear friend of Eamon de Valera.

Gert McMann was a strong, giving woman who founded the Girls Society of St. Augustin's Church.

5. How has Newport changed?

I view with admiration the people in Newport who founded groups to improve our community. Many of our mayors are carpetbaggers, not born in Newport, but who have contributed greatly. Bob McKenna one of my dear friends is like that.

When we lost the Navy, we had to find other ways to show off our city. The Newport Historical Society and the Preservation Society of Newport must be given credit for all that they showcase about Newport.

4. How do we preserve Irish Heritage?

Retain curiosity of the young about their heritage and use their energy.