

Interview Father Sarsfield

Oral History Interview: Father Sarsfield O'Sullivan.

Interview conducted by Ellen Crain, Director, Butte-Silver Bow Archives

The Interview covers Father O'Sullivan's family and youth in Butte.

Date October 19, 2006.

The first side of the tape appears to be corrupt and was not recorded.

From the Notes:

Sean O'Sullivan was born on Inish Fanard, an island off the Beara Peninsula. His father was Michael O'Sullivan. Father Sarsfield's mother was born in Butte, Montana one of the "Bawn" Murphy's and She was raised on the Beara Peninsula.

Michael O'Sullivan asked Lord Landsford if he could move to Inish Fanard to fish, and Lord Landsford said he could not because you could not land a boat on the Island.

Michael O'Sullivan told him he would build a dock.

There were three other families that lived on Inish Fanard, they were the Sheehan's, O'Neil's, and Malvey's.

Sheehan means peace or if you want to be vindictive, it means lazy.

Inish Fanard was strictly Gaelic speaking and had no schools.

Michael O'Sullivan had a seine fishing fleet.

The fishing communication on the ocean was better than the roads.

In Ireland in the 1870's the landlords were making more money with the loss of tenants than they made with keeping them. This created a great problem. The landlords were pushing the people off the land.

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Father O'Farrell shot a landlord in Offlay for the murder of a family and because of the crime he could not become a priest in the Ireland or United States, so he became a priest in Montreal, Canada. My brother Father Eamon, was to become an assistant to Father O'Farrell.

Sean O'Sullivan immigrated in 1905 to Butte. He was an avid reader and read at the library in Butte. The librarian at the time was Grandville Stuart and if a book was in bad shape, it would be condemned, these are the foundation of the library that I have.

Sean wrote poetry in Irish. Gaelic is a clean spoken language. Sean won many honors for his poetry.

Father Sarsfield's parents met in Butte at a dance.

His mother was 12 when she returned to Butte. She had two suitors, a man named Hartland and Father Sarsfield's father. She needed help making a choice between them, and She went to St. Patrick's to pray ,when she was leaving the church she passed Sean and that was her sign.

The last First Communion at the old St. Mary's was in 1931.

Josie Murphy O'Sullivan lost six stillborn babies, Tim, Liam, Donol Emmett, did not survive. Her Living children were Veronica, Eamon born in 1919 & Sarsfield O'Sullivan born in 1924.

Side Two of the tape.

FS: For me it. I'm sure a great number of Butte did and they experienced them from people from different nationalities too. Now I would say among the Catholics of Butte. Croatians and Slovenes the Italians, they spoke the English the Irish didn't where it's

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good or bad, that English was the common language of Butte kids, certainly among Catholic kids. And some things got a little changed and corrupted but like “All ye, All ye all in free” became “Allie, Allie Axon free.”

You know you’d hear it as time goes by, “Olie Olie Olson Free.” “But it was originally “All ye All ye all in free.” “But we didn’t say it like that as kids, we just said. “Allie, Allie Axon free.” And there still was a sense of what people had gone through. I can remember one of my best friends Jimmy Barry, and his grandma Barry, he had a grandma McQue and a grandma Barry, his grandma Barry had was a daughter from a Kildare Family that went over to England at a place called Cleator Moor, I always thought it was one Irish word, but it was two words and it was a place in England where there was mining. And some of those people went across to the mines there, and old Mrs. Barry would tell us the epitaphs that these English kids would call these Irish Catholic kids and one of them was goat suckers, that stay in my mind. Funny the things that will stay in your mind. And these that were abusive to the little Irish kids that were in England. You did learn certain things from the older people, and that was good, and you learned of course from your parents and best friends. And from one another, I think it’s a general rule, I’ve known people who grew up in a lot of different types of places, like one of my classmates was from a little place in Idaho, Greencreek, it was totally Catholic, all farmers and just everything was Catholic, and then but I thought, that my growing up in Butte was better. Not because there weren’t that there were non Catholic around, but there must have been enumerable things that you could make a study of, because that young man, young man, if he is living he’d be 81 at least and think that he left the priesthood and so did his brother, who was in the priest.

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But it's the vocation from St. Mary's, when I was studying for the priesthood was myself, Terry O'Donald, Emmet Lowney, and Jim Barry. Now the three of us except for Jim Barry our parents were from the Old County, and I'm the only one of the four who had a living father. St. Mary's I began to realize later was a parish of widows, there was just a great number of widows at St. Mary's Parish. And my generation was pretty much the last generation I would say, where most of us, our parents were from the old country, and it had certain advantages some disadvantages. Of course now, with what we know now, I bitterly regret not having learned Irish when I was little. That's what we know now that children can learn several languages but they thought it would ham string us. And I am so sorry now that I didn't become fluent in it, and I could have been, I envied this little Eamon O'Reardon who is learning Irish, very, very slowly, but at a very early age. There is so many thing that come in shrine in language and in Irish it's there's a few things that I know of Irish are that they seem to me to be that it sounds sweeter and it seems to be more on target. For instance, in I asked an Irish priest I said are there any things, advice you give me as to different ways of confessing sins, if I hear confessions, in Ireland, and he said the only I can think of off hand is he says, if a young man says, Father I did a bit of courting, he said, it bears looking into it. He said, it sounds innocent to you, but it isn't. And the eloquent way of putting it.

Up at the Old St. Mary's the old wooden building the story that is always embroidered, there's some of them have the edge of truth to them, but they've been embroidered a bit. The story was two young greenhorns, and one man hadn't made his Easter duty since he left Ireland and he said "judge do you know the way to the BA&P we've come to that tunnel at a pretty predictable time" he said, "let other people get ahead of you and then

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you go in right when you first hear the sound of the train, tell the priest some little stuff and then when the train comes through the tunnel, unload the big stuff.” And Father John Morrison said he used to love having his honor in the seat of confession smeared by my dad at dinner, because my dad would say things like this of course, you aren’t breaking the seal, he’d say I went to confession to Father John and he, said how much I’d cursed her children and brother-in-law and all these people were in the Irish freedom and Father Morrison said to me Sean, I just want your sins not your virtues. Father Morrison said with a smile; as if he’d scandalized a little kid.

Ellen: Tell me about the neighborhoods.

FS: Yes, but there was a wonderful, wonderful atmosphere to grow up in. The atmosphere of Cork Town and in those days it was just so good.

Ellen: Now you were a family of three as you were talking about your friends who came from those multiple huge families. And the widows situation I do know Father Barry’s family suffered many, many hardships. There was always a question in my head about how kids survived. I have a question am I coddling my children too much because you know I think when my dad talks of his childhood, there was far less supervision, then I impose upon my children. And more supervision then was imposed on me, you know, my mother would say get out of the house and come back at dinner, so there was very little monitoring of what kind of activities you were involved in and um, so I always get the impression of Cork Town being a wild, kids just really having a thrill.

FS: Yeah, but you know we didn’t in many ways need the supervision that children do today, there were not as many threats to our leading a good life, as there are for our kids today. I can for example on television the worse thing, not the sexual things, but violence

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constantly being exposed to violence I think for example in line with our Holy Father's, John XXIII he said about prize fighting, terrible thing for brother to do to brother. And He's right, it shouldn't be done. Because your object is to do damage to the other man's brain, and even if you're successful like Mohammad Ali, you end up with impaired intelligence. Bull fighting on the other hand is much more civilized, and you're not out to harm, and for kids to even have to see that on TV to see all this violence, not just seeing prize fighting but other violence, to my mind is much more harmful than anything sexual.

Ellen: I think that violence is the true break down of social structure and I think the more you're exposed to violence the less shocking it is.

FS: You know in Cork Town I would say this, Butte itself wasn't all that safe years ago. For example Father Lesner an old native German, when he would say mass out at Holy Savior, and he lived at Sacred Heart he would have a good sized stick with him, as a club, because he would be bringing home the collection. Now I can't think that of my ever having to do anything like that in my priesthood.

My mother as a young girl, answered a request for a good Catholic helper for a young family with a little baby, up in Libby and so she needing some kind of employment. I don't know how old she was at the time, my guess is 16, or 17 or maybe 18, I don't know. At any rate she went up there and then she wrote home to her mother, that they just worked her, every minute of the day and didn't feed very well. And so my grandmother ordered her to be sent home right away, she didn't want her child being treated that way. Now when she came back to Butte on the train, a man at the train depot, walked her home. Now you wouldn't think that would be necessary today, your safety

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would be when you were sure that you were in Cork Town. Rather than the opposite, it was just in getting home.

So there were a lot, it's like old Father LaGree, I used to love to listen to him, and I took a lot of notes, I have them in one volume of a book that I loaned to someone and I haven't gotten it back. On Indians and whites in the North West. But Father LaGree said that when he was at French Town, that's when they were putting through the Milwaukee Road, I think it was finished the year my parents married 1911. At any rate, he said that a part from the men who came from Europe, Croatians, and Italians, and Slovenes and so on, and I imagine there's some Irish too, but they employed a man who later became a very good friend of my fathers a Bulgarian, Demetrie Batcha, who later was a federal marshal in Butte. And Demetrie Batcha was there and Father LaGree's time. And Father LaGree said that the foreigners were very good and law abiding. He said the native, not the Native Americans, they were Indians, but the Americans were dregs of society. They were getting away from the law and other things and were coming out and working on the railroad. He said they're a very bad lot. LaGree, of course, was a powerful man, and when they found out that he was, such a strong man, they decided, whoever was the king of the mountain then, and it was between the lumber jacks and the railroad men, and one was, they'd have to fight each other, and one was the king of the mountain. So they said, well, you're going to have to fight the new priest, because he's such a powerful man. So Father LaGree was going up to the end of the track and it was saying office and this guy who had nothing against the church or him, he sat down and stuck his elbow into him and the fight was on. And the man ended up in St. Patrick's Hospital. And Father LaGree went and apologized to him, and when he tells the story, he was very shameful, he'd say,

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as if I was about to go do that. He'd say that is a very bad thing, for a priest to do, he said, I put that man into unconsciousness, that was a very, he said, don't you do that. And I was always a wimp and would worry about somebody else putting me into unconsciousness. But still, and yet he was strong minded because he said, he told the fellow that ran the bar, near the church in French Town; he said you will remain closed during the hours of mass. And the first Sunday there, the bartender didn't do that, and he went and he said he was too small to hit. So he pulled him out from back of the bar and he had, what do they call them, burnsides, side burns and after General Burnside, and he started pulling hair and he said, are you going to be open during the hours of mass next Sunday, and the man said, no Father I won't and he pulled some more hairs out, and he said are you going to be open? So he taught him to remain closed during the hours of mass. The priest before that, they tried to kill him. There was something wrong with his face and he barricaded himself with an Indian in the belfry of the church at French Town. That's why the Bishop put the Parish under interdict, forbade priest's to go into the parish. And then when LaGree came on the scene, he thought he had the right man for the job.

Ellen: Well you know really the settlement of the American West is the lawless.

FS: Yes

Ellen: It was a place to hide and it's interesting to me that even today, it is a place people come to hide. You know, the Uni-bomber, you know those sorts of situations, because it is such a geographically large place.

FS: Yes, easy to get lost in.

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Ellen: You know it's interesting about your mom, telling you about the man walking her home, I can't imagine that it was safe for a young girl to be outside of her area of safety.

FS: Yes

Ellen: And yet you get very few people who will tell you that, and I think it is true, I think your mother would have needed someone who

FS: Yes

Ellen: That's a good, I'm glad that you

FS: Yes and the very fact that the priest would need to carry a club, and he was a rather tough German too. He, the only other native German and I told Tom Mulcahy this, the only Cardinal I ever met, and he was our Holy Father's John Paul head of the humanism for awhile, he was Australian. But Bishop Reniff brought him to Helena, he drove him around and showed him different places and then he sent him down with Ernie and I at the luncheon, he said he's seen enough of me and so I told him, I said, I'd like to tell you, your eminency the first example of humanism in Butte, Montana. I said there were Lutheran Missouri Senate, all the others, were chiefly Scandinavian but the Missouri Senate Lutheran, St. Mark's on Montana Street, they would be chiefly German Lutheran, and their sphicter under Scandinavians. And the pastor, the name will come to me, the pastor, native German and Father Lesner in Dillon were native German, so he had to be the designated driver, at a Priest's party when they invited the Lutherans. Because the Lutheran, whenever, he was native German and whenever any of the parishioners made some bootleg whiskey, he'd call the priest and say, lets have a party. So the priest whenever someone, a friend of my father's Mike McEwen out in Brown's Gulch, would make bootleg whiskey, but very high standards and if he didn't approve of it, nobody was

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FS: Yes it is.

Ellen: I love Father Bratislav, you know why, his wife loves ? because she's Irish.

FS: Is that right?

Ellen: Yes, she's Irish Catholic. And his wife, his congregation. I'm going to leave you to have your lunch.

FS: That's alright.

Ellen: I would like to come back again maybe next week.

FS: Sure that sounds good.

Ellen: And I think I can come on Tuesday or Wednesday

FS: Okay, give me a call to make sure that I'm here.

Ellen: Alright, I will. And I want to talk to you about the trouble.

FS: Yes

Ellen: Alright.

FS: The Civil War in Ireland?

Ellen: Yes

FS: Yes.

Ellen: Alright.