

GAA Oral History Project

Interview Report Form

Name of Interviewer	Regina Fitzpatrick
Date of Interview	24 th Aug 2010
Location	Interviewee's home, near Forrest, Mountrath, Co. Laois.
Name of Interviewee (Maiden name / Nickname)	Leo and Teresa Brophy
<u>Biographical Summary of Interviewee</u>	
Gender	Male; Female
Born	Leo: Laois, 1945 Teresa: Laois, 1945
Education	Leo: Primary: Mountrath NS Teresa: Primary: Presentation Convent, Portlaoise, Co. Laois Secondary: Presentation Convent, Portlaoise, Co. Laois Third Level: Technical School, Portlaoise, Co. Laois
Family	Leo: Siblings: 7 brothers and 7 sisters Current Family if Different: Wife (Teresa), 2 daughters and 5 sons Teresa: Siblings: 3 brothers and 3 sisters Current Family if Different: Husband (Leo) 2 daughters and 5 sons
Club(s)	Mountrath GAA [Laois]

REFERENCE NO. LS/1/9

Occupation	Leo: Bus Driver & Hurley Maker Teresa: Housewife
Parents' Occupation	Leo: Hurley Maker [Father]; Housewife [Mother] Teresa: Labourer [Father]; Housewife [Mother]
Religion	Roman Catholic
Political Affiliation / Membership	N/A
Other Club/Society Membership(s)	Leo: Ballyroan Brass Band Teresa: Down Syndrome Ireland; Abbeyleix Dover House Support Group
Date of Report	31 st May 2012
Period Covered	End of 19 th century - 2011
Counties/Countries Covered	Laois
Key Themes Covered	Supporting, Grounds, Facilities, Playing, Administration, Celebrations, Fundraising, Sponsorship, Education, Religion, Media, Role of Teachers, Role of the Club in the Community, Rivalries, Club History, Earliest Memories, Family Involvement, Impact on Life, Career, Alcohol, Northern Ireland, Food and Drink, Socialising
Interview Summary	<p>Leo and Theresa discuss the family business of making hurls in Mountrath, Co. Laois. They reflect on the history of the business, which was started by Leo's grandfather after he moved to Laois from Northern Ireland, and discuss their hopes for the future of the business. They describe the process involved in making hurls and explain the importance of customising hurls to suit individual taste and preference. They also describe the importance of the GAA in the local community.</p> <p>00:32 He describes growing up outside Mountrath, the second youngest of a family of 14 children. Says that his father and grandfather have been making hurls since the inception of the GAA and that his brother still does it full-time.</p> <p>01:28 He explains that during the British occupation, his grandfather moved to Laois from Northern Ireland. Mentions a clog factory in Coolraine at the end of the 19th century. Describes how the parish assembled a hurling team of 18 players, who initially used sticks. Says that when his own father was unemployed after he got married, he and his brother-in-law took over from Leo's grandfather making hurls,</p>

	<p>in roughly 1918 or 1920.</p> <p>03:52 He explains that as well as making hurls, his father was involved in cutting timber and selling it as fuel for the town.</p> <p>04:11 Theresa explains that the GAA was seasonal, with no games in the winter, so Leo's father sold fuel in the winter. He explains that the waste timber and treetops left over from hurl-making went as fuel. He explains they supplied the local convent, the Brigidines Mountrath, and bakers with fuel. Describes how they also made ladders and horse equipment in the winter months.</p> <p>05:40 He believes his grand-father came from the North around 1880, and was in Mountrath a few years before he started making hurls.</p> <p>06:14 He describes the plentiful nature of ash trees back then. Mentions the nearby towns within a 10- or 20-mile radius where they got ash: Abbeyleix, Mountmellick, Camross, Coolraine. Says that with the rise of commercial farming nowadays, fields are being cleared and there is less ash.</p> <p>07:46 He explains the use of a cross saw for chopping trees before they had chainsaws.</p> <p>09:40 He describes the necessity of good land and sunshine for good ash.</p> <p>10:51 He explains how ash need constant water supply.</p> <p>11:20 He describes how, in his father's time, they could spend weeks making hurls. Recalls days spent in the wood cutting trees, bringing lunch, making fires. Remembers one day when they brought tea, sugar, and a kettle to the woods and bought a fresh batch loaf on the way. Describes how they realised in the wood they had no knife and his father trying to cut the loaf with an axe.</p> <p>13:24 He recalls being warned not to cut trees in raths. Ponders whether that superstition exists today.</p> <p>14:47 He recalls his father saying when there was a hard piece of wood that there must be fairies under that.</p> <p>15:40 He discusses cutting wood when there was no electricity, few tractors, and they dragged wood home by horse. He explains how they still used horses when he was young, pulling one stick at the time out onto the cart on the road. Recalls in the 1930s his father buying an old Ford from</p>
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	<p>the doctor (the only person with a car in the town) car, cutting the body out of it, and making a pick-up truck to transport the timber. Says it was faster than walking 7 or 8 miles with a horse.</p> <p>17:32 He describes how his father then took the mudguard off the back wheel and drove the circular saw off the back wheel, which he'd put on a rack bench. Explains how the circular saw worked. Describes how there was no band saws, so his father would mark the hurl out and cut in as far as the mark with a handsaw, then with a hatchet would pare away the rest. Explains that it was left to dry out for between a month and six months, depending on the timber.</p> <p>22:42 He recalls how all 14 children helped out with some part of the process.</p> <p>23:01 He describes the hand plane his father used to get the right thickness level and balance. Says after planing, they went to hardware shop and collected broken glass, and the girls would use the glass to smooth out the hurls, take the marks off it.</p> <p>24:19 He says in his father's time, the most they could make would be 12 hurls in a long day.</p> <p>24:45 He explains how his father made the hurls in a little room in a shed by the house. Recalls the lantern he worked with first, then a Tilly lamp, then electricity in 1954. Says that they lived in a thatched house at that time.</p> <p>25:24 He describes how from an old axle from a van and other scrap, he made a band saw to make cutting out the hurls easier. Says that he was asked to bring it to a vintage show and has shown it around the country. Mentions he was featured in the Irish Independent and on Nationwide.</p> <p>27:43 Explains how the band saw took the labour out of the process and describes his father's reservations about the band saw, preferring the plane. She reminds Leo he still uses the plane.</p> <p>29:00 He describes how his father, Martin Brophy, was the only hurl-maker in the locality at the time and that the county team and county boards used to come to him for hurls. She recalls Martin telling her that during the war, the army bought hurls for the soldiers in the Curragh to keep them occupied. She says her uncle used to play on the army hurling team and travelled around the country with the team. She describes how when the soldiers got the hurls, they used</p>
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	<p>them for firewood. She says Martin got extra petrol coupons in order to deliver the hurls to the Curragh and that he was able to buy a pound of Irish tea for one pound because he got the contract. She compares this with her own mother's ration book during the war and the scarcity of food: half an ounce of tea and a pound of sugar.</p> <p>31:49 He discusses his older brother, who never made a hurl but acted as salesman for the hurling business. He explains how this brother never learned to drive but took hurls on a bicycle. Mentions the brother bringing hurls to the college in Maynooth and to Dublin by train and getting lifts from other people. She explains how this brother would go up to Elvery's in Dublin with a bag of hurls and would sell them all.</p> <p>33:15 He says as soon as they came home from school in the evenings, they'd start working for their father. Mentions Johnny Hyland and Tommy Brophy who worked for them during busy times.</p> <p>33:57 He recalls being in the workshop one night, aged 7 or 8, when Christy Ring arrived in an Esso lorry to collect a couple of hurls. Says that Ring's hurls were nearly an inch and a half thick at the bottom.</p> <p>35:45 He explains that the hurls were custom-made according to players' preferences. Mentions some customers of his father: Pat Hartigan from Limerick, Sparrow O'Loughlin from Clare.</p> <p>36:18 He says his father made a Laois hurl, which was wider than the Cork hurl, and that some Kilkenny players wouldn't use the Laois one. Compares the difference in length between his father's hurls and hurls nowadays. Discusses individual preference for differently shaped hurls.</p> <p>39:06 He describes how his late sister, Sheila, was taken by her father to a match in Thurles and how she sat on his shoulders, watching Mick Mackey play. Explains that Mackey had got hurls from his father the week before. Mentions Christy Ring was hurling that day. She recalls Sheila played camogie.</p> <p>40:55 He discusses the changes in hurl-making. Explains that in the early 1960s, the GAA received sponsorship from Lucozade for hurleys, which represented a move into commercial hurley-making. He mentions that timber was getting scarce and that a committee in town wanted to make hurley-making more commercial, but his father wanted to keep the business personal. Discusses Lucozade's</p>
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	<p>sponsorship of a process involving splicing the hurls and using the timber for firewood to make hurls by putting a piece in the back to strengthen it, such as plywood. Discusses the foreign games ban. Says that locals were employed to do this splicing. Mentions some locals' refusal to take sponsorship from Lucozade because it was a foreign company. Describes how Lucozade sponsored hurls to be given to schools.</p> <p>44:47 He mentions Billy O'Neill, Liam O'Neill's father, who was involved in this business. Says that Liam O'Neill was the local Christy Ring.</p> <p>45:36 He compares his father's traditional hurl with the commercially produced ones. Says the spliced men's hurls were not successful but their children's hurls were adequate. Explains that they were cheaper.</p> <p>46:35 He describes how some customers brought in their own wood.</p> <p>47:10 He compares sally to ash.</p> <p>46:49 He explains that ash is flexible, which makes it suitable for clashing, and that the quality of the grain is good.</p> <p>48:44 He says his father only used Irish ash, which was plentiful. Explains that there were very few leagues years ago and that hurling was seasonal. Recalls a street league in Mountrath. Says that the hurling season would start on the 17th March and finish with the All-Ireland. Compares that to nowadays with floodlights and more leagues and indoor games, all of which have increased demand for hurls.</p> <p>51:00 He discusses the advent of the copying machine in the 1970s, which made hurl-making more commercial. Explains that part of the copying machines was made in Germany, which the Germans used for making hatchet handles. Says that although those machines are ubiquitous now, he still uses a band saw and plane and that his brother Sean still uses a band saw. Outlines the benefits of customising hurls to the individual.</p> <p>53:18 He explains how the mass production of the copying machines helped to meet increased demand. She recalls selling hurls to girls for camogie and discusses customers' various preferences for lighter or heavier hurls, wide or narrow bases, depending on position and preference.</p> <p>55:40 He discusses different trends in hurl styles, with a wide boss being popular nowadays. Explains how high-profile players can start a trend with their preferences. She says</p>
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	<p>their son Thomas loves making hurls, even though he works in IT in England.</p> <p>01:00:38 He asserts that hurl-making cannot be taught, that it's in the blood. She says their eldest son has no interest in making hurls.</p> <p>01:02:10 He says hurl-making is a family tradition and outside workers rarely stay in the profession. Explains that hurl-making has become more popular in the recession. She says carpenters who can't get work are now making hurls.</p> <p>01:04:00 He says this increase in supply has made the business more competitive. Discusses customers' loyalty to hurl-makers. They mention customers from Offaly, Clare, and America.</p> <p>01:06:07 He reflects on the art of making hurls.</p> <p>01:06:52 He recalls the most unusual requests for hurl shape.</p> <p>01:07:42 He explains how correct balance makes a good hurl: thickness, quality of timber, type of timber. Says that balance can be tested by holding the hurl.</p> <p>01:08:50 He explains how it helps to have been a hurler to make hurls.</p> <p>01:09:24 He describes how different positions require different hurl shapes; for example, a forward needs a lighter hurl. Mentions that right-handed and left-handed players need a different shaped bas.</p> <p>01:10:41 He explains that when he watches hurling matches he is observing the hurls. Describes how Cork players have completely different-shaped hurls. Says he recognises the work of different hurl-makers'.</p> <p>01:11:42 He mentions other hurl-makers: Ramie Dowling in Kilkenny and another in Tipperary. Explains that some Galway players have a more traditional-shaped hurl, along with some Tipperary and Kilkenny players, with a narrower boss. She mentions that Henry Shefflin favours a wider boss. She mentions Matt Rinng. She describes Jimmy Doyle using their hurl in the All-Ireland and that many Offaly hurlers use theirs. He explains how Jimmy Doyle's hurl was different to a lot of the Tipperary hurls.</p> <p>01:14:22 He outlines the changes over the years in the supply and demand of ash. Says that up to the 1960s, supply met demand. In the 80s, 90s, and today, sales of hurls in England,</p>
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	<p>America, New Zealand, and Australia, have increased demand, and that the advent of national leagues, county leagues, and club leagues have at least quadrupled demand. Describes the scarcity of ash, which became expensive. Mentions that English ash is more brittle than Irish ash but that Germany has good-quality ash trees. Explains that through the clubs, the GAA tried to encourage locals to plant ash. Describes how the forestry then started importing ash, so he bought planks off the forestry. Says that some of the planted ash trees are maturing now, so there is less importing.</p> <p>01:17:55 He explains that television has promoted hurling and made it more popular for young people who idolise Joe Cooley or Henry Shefflin. Describes how in such counties as Mayo, Kerry, Kildare, and Wicklow, counties not traditionally noted for hurling, it is becoming more popular. She mentions the popularity of the sport in Antrim, where monks promoted it.</p> <p>01:19:48 He talks about the expansion of the business of making hurls for children. She says they make them from 15 inches or 24 inches.</p> <p>01:20:28 They discuss the children's excitement in getting a customised hurl, and the thrill of being allowed to help finish the hurl.</p> <p>01:23:28 He describes being featured on the television programme <i>Nationwide</i> and in Brenda Power's interview for the <i>Irish Independent</i> for his band saw made out of scrap.</p> <p>01:25:27 He says hurling is more popular nowadays but that people are less obsessed with winning. Describes how in the past, hurling was a religion in Tipperary and Cork. He recalls Camross winning the county championship a few years in a row and the toughness of the games, She says the animosity was very local animosity back then but that there is less bitter rivalry today because people are mixing more together nowadays in college, school, and work.</p> <p>01:27:45 He mentions rivalry after a recent match with a small club in Slieve Bloom mountains, a mile from Slieve Bloom hurling club.</p> <p>01:29:31 She recalls gloating when clubs won in the past.</p> <p>01:30:56 He discusses Mountrath's rivals, Castletown, only a mile apart. Says that Mountrath has a team over 100 years old.</p>
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	<p>01:31:36 He recalls his first hurling games in primary school, being trained by Brother Lissarian, then Brother Robert, then Brother Eunan. Describes going on to hurl in Ballyfin College. Discusses street leagues in Mountrath. Mentions Coote Street, which had 14 or 15 players. Also mentions Woodbrook. She says there were big families back then. He recalls going to a game in a horse and cart with no floor in the cart. They mention playing in Fintey's Field. He describes people falling out over hurling for years.</p> <p>01:33:44 He discusses playing for Mountrath. Describes playing games on Sunday mornings after first mass 10 o'clock. Explains that men hurled from the age of 14 or 15 to 50 or 60. Mentions Mick Togan. Describes progression to junior and minor team.</p> <p>01:34:49 He recalls playing around the back line. Explains that he won a country final in 1975, became a selector himself, won junior and intermediate the following year. She talks about their son in Kilkenny training Kilkenny teams.</p> <p>01:35:53 He explains the benefits to the community of the GAA: how hurling took young lads off the street, GAA players were guards of honour at funerals and dug graves.</p> <p>01:37:04 He discusses the difficulty of being a selector.</p> <p>01:37:43 Discusses his time as vice chairman and treasurer of Mountrath in the 1970s. Explains that with no regular income, the weekly Lotto was very significant in bringing in money. Also mentions raffles, dances, carnivals, churchgate collections. She recalls a Lord Mayor competition to raise funds. Mentions Christy McManus who was involved.</p> <p>01:40:43 He discusses developments in the club. Outlines his plans for dressing rooms and a hall and recreation facilities, which had plenty of support from the town, bank manager, college in Ballyfin, county board, and Leinster Council. Explains how these plans were scrapped because of concerns over cost in Mountrath and that only dressing rooms were built. Describes the developments since then: fencing around the field, floodlights, drained pitch, carpark installed. Mentions that the GAA bought the field for the carpark in 1947 or 1948 and Mrs Bergin who owned it. They explain that it's called St Fintans GAA Club, after a local saint. They discuss the myths surrounding St. Fintan's Well, located between Mountrath and Portlaoise.</p> <p>01:46:49 He explains development of Mountrath from the 1600s. Mentions Algernon Coote, an Englishman involved in</p>
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	<p>developing the town.</p> <p>01:47:29 He says local hurling started with Jim Miller. Mentions a Patrician monastery in Mountrath in 1880s.</p> <p>01:48:05 He discusses the start of camogie within the club, mentions Eilish O'Hara. Explains that the Brigidine convent didn't want girls playing physical sport.</p> <p>01:49:18 They say football is not significant in Mountrath. He describes how, in 1943, Mountrath won the football county final. He mentions Billy O'Neill, Benny Hunt, Billy Ramsbottom, the Guiders who were painters. She mentions Nan Guider who played camogie. Explains how non-locals strengthened the team.</p> <p>01:50:44 He discusses sources of employment in Mountrath. Mentions Wicklow man Sharkey who started up a timber business.. Also mentions the foundry, which made manhole covers, ring rollers for farming. Also O'Connells shop, which supplied institutions, for example hospitals and prisons, with groceries, before health boards did it. He recalls work driving around supplying Kilkenny, Dublin, Tipperary, and Kildare hospitals with groceries for O'Connells. Describes a girl's full-time job in O'Connells testing eggs. Mentions Nolans the drapery shop. Explains that it was all small industry, with no big factories. Mentions several hurl-makers. Explains how Bord na Mona started in the area and created seasonal work in the 60s. Also mentions farming and the cattle mart, which attracted buyers from Scotland and Northern Ireland. Mentions a meat factory in Rathdowney, plenty of pubs, Telfords hardware, mills.</p> <p>01:56:37 He discusses the traditional GAA pubs in Mountrath, the Kirwans 'and Johnny Purcell's, an Offaly man from Killee who has vast knowledge about hurling. Explains how the Castletown and Mountrath supporters go to alternate pubs. Mentions that Slieve Bloom supporters drink in Tom Delaney's pub.</p> <p>01:57:52 Explains that nobody made sliotars in Mountrath. Recalls his father stitching them. She recalls jumpers for goalposts.</p> <p>01:59 They discuss their seven children. They say their second-eldest, Terry, was involved in hurling and that the eldest was good at football and hurling but not that interested. Explains that their daughters were more interested in it and that their daughter Theresa won a camogie medal with</p>
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	<p>Ballyfin College.</p> <p>02:00:05 She recalls that growing up in Portlaoise, her family were not into hurling, and that Portlaoise was more into football. Describes her brother hurling for Clonad and Ballyfin and then playing for St Fintan's Hospital when he became a psychiatric nurse. Mentions her uncle, who played with the army in Croke Park. Explains that her 3 brothers preferred football. Says her mother lived opposite football field in Timahoe and gave part of their land to build football fields.</p> <p>02:02:04 He says north of Portlaoise, football is the main interest, whereas south of Portlaoise, it's hurling. Mentions Ballyroan, 4 miles from Portlaoise, which is involved exclusively in football. Explains that Stradbally only play football but that Rathdowney, Borris-in-Ossory, Errill, Kilcotton, Abbeyleix play only hurling. She explains that people relocating to work in different towns start up hurling or football teams.</p> <p>02:04:25 They describe the benefits of the GAA in Mountrath, namely, the boost hurling matches give the area, the socialising in the pub after the matches. He compares soccer unfavourably to hurling, with the lack of scoring. She discusses the skill and speed and lack of injury involved in hurling. She discusses the fitness of the players and the benefits of being involved in the community. He discusses the pre-match chatter during mass before the game. She discusses the social benefits of being involved in sport: keeping young people out of trouble.</p> <p>02:09:28 She reflects on the uniqueness of hurling to Ireland and the sense of national pride involved. She discusses the need to promote hurling.</p> <p>02:11:13 They describe their optimism for the sport in Ireland and the importance of the hurling tradition. He discusses the GAA changing rules to make the games safer with less injuries, the possibility of those rules weakening local rivalry.</p> <p>02:12:42 He reflects on the importance of hurl-making in his family and his hopes that their son in England will return to make hurls. They discuss their young grandsons' interest in the profession.</p> <p>02:13:49 He ponders the future of hurl-makers in general: less physical work, more machinery involved, but still a need for customised hurl that have to be done by hand.</p> <p>02:15:21 He describes the long tradition of trying to make</p>
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	<p>hurls out of materials other than wood.</p> <p>02:17:04 He explains that he would like to see the GAA develop hurling in weaker counties and spend money to raise the standards in those counties; for example, Westmeath and Mayo. Discusses his hopes that more counties will strengthen their teams.</p> <p>02:22:32 Discusses the satisfaction in getting the balance of a hurl right and making customers happy.</p>
Involvement in GAA	<p>Leo:</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Supporter <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Player <input type="checkbox"/> Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Coach <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Steward</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chairperson <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Committee Member <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Grounds-person</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Caterer <input type="checkbox"/> Jersey Washer <input type="checkbox"/> Referee <input type="checkbox"/> None</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): Team Physio</p> <p>Teresa:</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Supporter <input type="checkbox"/> Player <input type="checkbox"/> Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Coach <input type="checkbox"/> Steward</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Chairperson <input type="checkbox"/> Committee Member <input type="checkbox"/> Grounds-person</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Caterer <input type="checkbox"/> Jersey Washer <input type="checkbox"/> Referee <input type="checkbox"/> None</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p>
Record as a Player (Titles won; Length of time played)	<p>Leo: Played hurling for Mountrath age 12-39 years. Won Laois Intermediate County Championship</p> <p>Teresa: None</p>
Record as an Administrator (Positions held; how long for)	<p>Leo: Selector, Trainer and Chairman for Mountrath GAA.</p> <p>Teresa: None</p>
Format	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Audio <input type="checkbox"/> Audio-Visual</p>
Duration	<p>Length of Interview: 02:25:11</p>
Language	<p>English</p>

To be filled in by Interviewer:

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Signed: Regina Fitzpatrick

Date: 31st May 2012