

GAA Oral History Project

Interview Report Form

Name of Interviewer	Seán Kearns
Date of Interview	20 th Sept 2009
Location	Gaelic Park, Bronx, New York
Name of Interviewee (Maiden name / Nickname)	John Riordan
<u>Biographical Summary of Interviewee</u>	
Gender	Male
Born	Year Born: 1946 Home County: Kerry
Education	Primary: Ballyguinn NS
Family	Siblings: Middle of 5 boys and 1 girl Current Family if Different: Married with 2 children
Club(s)	Castlegregory [Kerry]
Occupation	Inspector with Gas Company
Parents' Occupation	Farmers
Religion	Roman Catholic
Political Affiliation / Membership	Democrat

REFERENCE NO. KY/1/12

Date of Report	7 th June 2010
Period Covered	1950s – 2009
Counties/Countries Covered	Kerry, New York
Key Themes Covered	Travel, Supporting, Grounds, Facilities, Officials, Administration, Celebrations, Material Culture, Education, Emigration, Involvement in GAA abroad, Role of Women, Role of the Club in the Community, Volunteers, GAA Abroad, Identity, Rivalries, Club History, County History, Irish History, Earliest Memories, Family Involvement, Childhood, Impact on Life, Politics, Opening of Croke Park, Relationship with the Association, Economy/Economics
Interview Summary	<p>John Riordan was born in Kerry in 1946 and the interview covers his early memories of club life with his local club, Castlegregory, and Kerry football in general in the 1950s and 1960s including facilities, travel, training, pitches and the media. He emigrated to New York in 1964 and the interview covers his experiences in the vibrant GAA scene in New York at that time, centred on Gaelic Park. Although not a player, he was involved with several clubs before becoming a major figure with the Kerry side in New York and the interview gives an insight into the difficulties of running a club in the city – the changing role of emigration, the challenges of bringing players from Ireland and his work as President of the NY GAA including the redevelopment of Gaelic Park in recent years.</p> <p>0:00:15 Describes earliest GAA memory of listening to 1953 All-Ireland Football Final between Kerry and Armagh on radio, when the radio broke and his father’s friend smashed his pint he was so angry. They had no other way of following it as they didn’t have money to go to the game.</p> <p>0:00:50 Talks about his father’s attachment to GAA and the local club, Castlegregory. Tom Moriarty was one of their local heroes and names other players from the locality.</p> <p>0:02:00 Talks about impact of emigration on club and guys going to Boston, especially for his generation who had little education. Talks about father dying when he was none and leaving school at 12.</p> <p>0:03:00 Talks about how local community in Kerry has gone up and down over the years and problems there now with</p>

REFERENCE NO. KY/1/12

	<p>decline of fishing and tourism suffering due to economy being down. People there will have to emigrate again.</p> <p>0:04:00 Talks about club life when he was young in Castlegregory – fundraisers and card games and sales of work, and Pioneer socials. Something for old and young.</p> <p>0:04:50 Talks about regret missing growing up in some traditional ways because of father's death and having to go live with an uncle aged 9.</p> <p>0:05:00 Talks about pitch the club had and access to a dance hall for meetings and functions. Club have extended it since and improved pitch through fundraising. It used to have a fall in it.</p> <p>0:06:30 Castlegregory are strong now. None of the team emigrated this year, even students for the summer.</p> <p>0:07:00 Talks about problems caused for a club with two dressing rooms when you get lots of women players.</p> <p>0:07:20 Talks about learning to play football by playing with a big group in a field – pretending to be a Mick O'Connell.</p> <p>0:08:00 Football was their socialising, especially for him who was a teetotaller.</p> <p>0:08:55 Talks about his Kerry heroes when he was a kid – like going to Railway Cup game in Tralee in a round 1960s. Con Sullivan and Mick O'Connell versus Des Foley. Tells story about Mick O'Connell walking off because a game didn't start on time. But all the boys wanted to be O'Connell. John Dowling was also a hero.</p> <p>0:10:45 Talks about listening to their heroes on the radio and seeing them train or play in local club games. You aspired to be one of those guys, although he was never able to really play because of injuries.</p> <p>0:11:40 Talks about time he's dedicated to Gaelic Football in New York and how he had great times and doesn't regret it.</p> <p>0:12:20 Talks about coming to New York aged 17 in 1964, and how green and naive they were, not like today's generation who have lots of experience of the world.</p> <p>0:13:00 Talks about getting involved in New York GAA</p>
--	---

REFERENCE NO. KY/1/12

	<p>straight away when he arrived in New York, the first time he walked in the gate he was recruited by a Kerry man names Brendan Bric.</p> <p>0:13:20 Talks about his first trip to Gaelic Park on a scorching day and getting made to be an umpire or linesman straight away.</p> <p>0:13:40 Talks about having run for every office in the New York GAA, possibly excepting secretary. Was president in 2008, felt like he'd earned it for all his work, especially because he lived in Brooklyn which is a terrible journey to Gaelic Park on the train. You drive through three cities to get there.</p> <p>0:15:50 Describes Gaelic Park in the 1960s when he arrived. A huge disappointment, he thought it would be amazing from all the stories they'd heard about John Kerry O'Donnell. But it was a wreck. Great crowds though, with the sides packed around the field. He saw people fall on the banks and take twenty other spectators down with them.</p> <p>0:17:20 The field was completely bare down the middle and full of stones. Sod was rock hard and fixtures so congested that the championship from one year wasn't finished until the next. But the crowds made up for it. So many people from home would meet there, lots from his village and that was how you kept in touch because phone calls were non-existent and newspapers only arrived a week later by post.</p> <p>0:19:00 Communicating with back home was harder. He went home twice in the first eight years he was over. Now the kids are only here and they're going home for the weekend for their grandmother's birthday or whatever.</p> <p>0:19:45 Talks about John Kerry O'Donnell supporting so many causes in New York and back home and the Cardinal Cushing Games, when O'Donnell would bring over all the great players from Ireland to play Kerry in New York, and Kerry could beat them.</p> <p>0:20:40 Talks about high standard of football in New York in later 1950s to 1960s. They could have won All-Ireland's with the Nolans from Offaly and Brendan Tumulty and Norman Allen and so many other players. Some of the Irish Americans were brilliant also – the Sullivan brothers. Mickey Moynihan</p>
--	--

REFERENCE NO. KY/1/12

	<p>from Kerry was an incredible player as was Mickey Whelan from Dublin.</p> <p>0:22:00 Talks about the bad relationship between New York and GAA in Dublin at that time – John Kerry O’Donnell and the bosses in Dublin didn’t get on. The Dublin fellas didn’t want to be involved in New York.</p> <p>0:22:50 Talks about the different type of immigration in the 1960s – players were emigrating permanently to get work and worked in the big utilities – telephone company, transit company, electric company. Not coming over for the summer to play football.</p> <p>0:23:30 The players who came over in the 1960s to New York could have been the greats of the game if they’d had a chance to play in the championship back home.</p> <p>0:24:20 Talks about his first club in New York, the Brooklyn Shamrocks and the teams they had. Kerry team in New York at that time was controlled tightly by Kerry O’Donnell. He was old school and he ran a great show although John fought with him a lot. O’Donnell wanted to keep control of the New York GAA even if that meant keeping it smaller.</p> <p>0:25:00 Talks about importance of the new artificial field at Gaelic Park in keeping New York GAA going and plans to redevelop the facilities at the rest of the park.</p> <p>0:26:00 Talks about challenges for Irish emigrants in New York now due to visa restrictions and problems of being undocumented. New York needs Irish emigration, and New York is the main place for the GAA outside Ireland.</p> <p>0:26:50 Talks about importance of Minor Board and encouraging underage players to come through. GAA should be able to keep those players involved. Lists examples of Irish American players who’ve done well.</p> <p>0:27:50 Talks about growth of women’s gaelic football and strength of camogie in earlier times.</p> <p>0:28:25 Talks about challenges of keeping Irish American kids involved with so many competing sports out there, where there might be scholarships involved.</p> <p>0:30:30 New York need to do more to get kids involved and</p>
--	---

REFERENCE NO. KY/1/12

	<p>staying involved.</p> <p>0:30:45 Talks about different ways in which players were brought over from Ireland historically – the weekenders and now the 60 day sanction players. Talks about problems with the 60 day sanction players because they can be like professionals - negotiating terms with different clubs and telling each how much the other is offering. He'd prefer to deal with the weekenders – rather than setting up summer jobs for students who don't want to work.</p> <p>0:32:00 Talks about Taoiseach Brian Cowen, coming over to New York in the late 1960s and playing and working construction in Manhattan. Happy to get a job and a place to stay. Now they want money for no work.</p> <p>0:32:40 The players now want to get paid for everything they do.</p> <p>0:33:00 The students over for the summer are just a headache for the clubs in New York and they don't even dedicate themselves to it.</p> <p>0:34:00 Talks about moving from the Brooklyn Shamrocks to the Kerry team after 6 or 7 years in New York. Kerry had so many players he started a third team with the extras, St Brendan's and won a championship with them the first year.</p> <p>0:34:45 Then got involved in Kerry and often wondered if that was wise given the time he's put into it and wondering was there anyone else to help out.</p> <p>0:35:00 The club tends to depend on the work of the same four or five people – fundraising, setting up jobs and apartments for players. You'd need more people to make it possible. You have no time and you're always running around.</p> <p>0:36:30 Talks about when Wexford had a team in New York under Mick Morrissey, even though he was from Carlow. He recalls a game when Wexford played Kilkenny in New York and each team had 8 or 9 of the actual county team from home out as weekenders but the game was cancelled.</p> <p>0:37:30 Talks about how bringing over weekenders alienated the Irish American players who got dropped when the</p>
--	--

REFERENCE NO. KY/1/12

	<p>weekenders arrived. Most of that is gone.</p> <p>0:38:20 Talks about shame of top GAA players back in Ireland who can't get work in the recession. That was one thing the GAA used to do well was look after its players for work.</p> <p>0:38:45 GAA wasn't a big advantage for him in his work but it was for lots of other people in New York – there were connections into the utilities and the cops and firemen. And then Irish bosses in those companies would get people time off to train.</p> <p>0:40:00 Bar owners would also be helpful in getting your players jobs.</p> <p>0:40:45 Talks about tensions within clubs in New York and having to win a game by ten points because there were always people watching to see if there was bias for Kerry because he was on the board or whatever. And tension of being on the board and trying to do the best for your club as well.</p> <p>0:41:00 Talks about Kerry not getting any favouritism in New York because they were seen as the elite.</p> <p>0:42:00 Talks about how he made friends from every county in Ireland through the GAA. Tells story about staying in touch with an Antrim footballer and getting a letter from him when he was elected President of the New York GAA.</p> <p>0:43:20 Says the good thing about GAA is you can put a win or loss behind you and stay friends with the opposition.</p> <p>0:43:50 Talks about how amateur nature of GAA is key to its success and it annoys him to hear fellas are getting this or that for managing playing.</p> <p>0:44:10 Talks about feeling sad when they opened up Croke Park to soccer but you have to move with the times. Felt Sean Kelly thought it was a way to bring in income and keep GAA amateur.</p> <p>0:45:00 Talks about his aims as President of the New York GAA Board once elected in 2008. Felt he had paid his dues by filling every position in New York GAA and attending every</p>
--	--

REFERENCE NO. KY/1/12

	<p>game until recently.</p> <p>0:45:50 He really wanted to make the field at Gaelic Park a better place for play and a better place to come and be entertained, so that they could be proud of it.</p> <p>0:46:50 Talks about Sean Kelly doing a lot for Gaelic Park as President of the GAA and how he understood what it meant.</p> <p>0:48:00 Talks about trying to stay in touch with Kerry GAA back home as an immigrant. When he lived in Kerry they cycled 30 miles to the train to get to a game. It's much easier to do it now from New York – a few hours on the plane.</p> <p>0:49:40 Describes best GAA memory as winning championship in New York with his new club, St Brendans. And then getting elected President of the New York GAA.</p> <p>0:50:00 His worst GAA memory was losing a junior final with Brooklyn Shamrocks to Cavan. Frank McGuigan was the referee and gave a free against them and Cavan won.</p> <p>0:51:59 Describes best hurling game he ever saw as one in New York between Tipperary and Westmeath. Best football game was possibly one of the Kerry finals when they won the three-in-a-row in the 2000s. Pdraig Joyce was unbelievable for them as was Seamus Moynihan and Dara O Cinneide.</p> <p>0:53:45 Describes his best team as the Kerry 4 in a row team – far better than the modern teams like Tyrone. Pat Spillane, Jack O'Shea were untouchable.</p> <p>0:55:10 Talks about his GAA heroes – Mick O'Dwyer gave so much to the game. Brian Mullins was tremendous. Tony Hanahoe...</p> <p>0:56:40 Describes what makes him proud about the GAA – they're the backbone of a country that had a lot of troubles and allows people to put their troubles aside and play.</p> <p>0:57:20 He finds it disappointing when people are in the GAA for what they can get out of it or to get places.</p>
--	--

REFERENCE NO. KY/1/12

Involvement in GAA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Supporter <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Player <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Manager <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Coach <input type="checkbox"/> Steward <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chairperson <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Committee Member <input type="checkbox"/> Grounds-person <input type="checkbox"/> Caterer <input type="checkbox"/> Jersey Washer <input type="checkbox"/> Referee <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____
Record as a Player (Titles won; Length of time played)	N/A
Record as an Administrator (Positions held; how long for)	President, NY GAA Board, 2008 Occupied all other posts on New York Board at one time or another.
Format	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Audio <input type="checkbox"/> Audio-Visual
Duration	Length of Interview: 00:57:30
Language	English

REFERENCE NO. KY/1/12

To be filled in by Interviewer:

I hereby assign the copyright of the content of the above to the GAA Oral History Project on the understanding that the content will not be used in a derogatory manner. I understand that I am giving the GAA Oral History Project the right to use and make available to the public the content of this interview.

Signed: Seán Kearns

Date: 1st July 2010

