

## GAA Oral History Project

## Interview Report Form

<b>Name of Interviewer</b>	Seán Kearns
<b>Date of Interview</b>	8 <sup>th</sup> Sept 2009
<b>Location</b>	Interviewee's Home, near Queens, New York
<b>Name of Interviewee</b> (Maiden name / Nickname)	Thomas Smyth – "Tommy"
<b><u>Biographical Summary of Interviewee</u></b>	
<b>Gender</b>	Male
<b>Born</b>	<b>Year Born:</b> 1945 <b>Home County:</b> Louth
<b>Education</b>	<b>Primary:</b> Local National School
<b>Family</b>	<b>Siblings:</b> 4 siblings
<b>Club(s)</b>	St Brides, Knockbridge GAA [Louth]; Louth in New York [America]
<b>Occupation</b>	Sports Broadcaster ESPN, USA
<b>Parents' Occupation</b>	Council Worker, Housewife
<b>Religion</b>	Roman Catholic
<b>Political Affiliation / Membership</b>	Independent

**REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2**

<b>Date of Report</b>	25 <sup>th</sup> May 2010
<b>Period Covered</b>	1950s - 2009
<b>Counties/Countries Covered</b>	Louth, New York, Americas
<b>Key Themes Covered</b>	Travel, Supporting, Grounds, Facilities, Playing, Training, Managing, Coaching, Administration, Celebrations, Commiserations, Fundraising, Media, Emigration, Involvement in GAA abroad, Role of Clergy, Role of Teachers, Role of Women, Role of the Club in the Community, Volunteers, GAA Abroad, Identity, Rivalries, All-Ireland, Club History, County History, Family Involvement, Childhood, Impact on Life, Career, Challenges, Relationship with the Association, Professionalism, Food and Drink, Socialising, Purchase of Grounds, Relationships
<b>Interview Summary</b>	<p>Tommy Smyth was born in Louth in 1945 and played for local club St Bride's Knockbridge and for Louth Minors. He was secretary of St Bride's at age 15 and paints a vivid picture of the central place of GAA in village life – the role of the club, clergy, the local paper and the radio, local rivalries, as well as the celebrations for Louth when they won in 1957. The interview also takes in comment on GAA tactics in his youth, the impact of the ban and the Irish language in the GAA. He emigrated to New York in 1963 and was a mainstay as player and manager and administrator of the Louth club in New York for many years, until the club ceased to exist due to lack of numbers. He is a television broadcaster by profession, commentating on soccer for the major US network, ESPN, and he also commentated on GAA live at Gaelic Park for many years, as well as presenting Irish and GAA programming on New York radio, especially on All-Ireland Day. The interview covers the difficulties in keeping a club going in New York and of keeping in touch with GAA news from home, the mixed blessing of players being brought over from Ireland to play, and the relationship between the GAA in New York and Ireland, as well as the vibrancy of Gaelic Park and the GAA network in 1960s New York and the tough but good football of that era. There are also views on how the GAA could have been more successful in the USA and internationally.</p> <p>0:00:10 Describes earliest memories of GAA as being involved with the parish team, St Brides, in his home village of</p>

REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2

	<p>Knockbridge, Co Louth. Aged 6 or 7 going to support the Bride's and starting to play for the under 14's not long after. Very fanatical supporters in that village.</p> <p>0:00:50 Describes family as not fanatical GAA supporters. His dad followed all sports – he did something regarded as scandalous by bringing Tommy to Oriel Park to watch Dundalk play soccer. His brothers were involved with Brides and still are.</p> <p>0:01:30 He was only one of brothers to get anywhere playing – he played for Louth minors in 1963.</p> <p>0:01:50 Describes the GAA club as the community in Knockbridge. Nobody talked about anything else. Mass was scheduled around GAA. Three big families in Knockbridge, the Byrne's, the Marry's and the Mackin's. The first Sunday he was in Gaelic Park in new York, somebody heard he was from Knockbridge and said "The Byrnes, the Marry's and the Mackin's."</p> <p>0:03:00 Describes link between clergy and the GAA in Knockbridge in his youth – priest always the president or similar of club.</p> <p>0:03:10 Describes progressive nature of Bride's club at that time as regards developing facilities, fields and structures. Paddy Marry kept the field well and they had showers before anyone else. Elsewhere you changed in the ditch and put clothes in a plastic bag to stop them getting wet.</p> <p>0:04:00 Describes becoming the youngest secretary of the club at 15. Priests always at meeting. There was no question about that. Nicky Marry was a big figure in Louth GAA and he got Tommy in a secretary – he was a confident, talkative guy, who always had an opinion and wasn't afraid to take people on.</p> <p>0:05:00 Describes village meeting to discuss the game on Sunday evening outside Brodigan's Shop. Sixty to a hundred gathered and feelings ran high. Players were criticised or praised.</p> <p>0:05:50 Describes difficulty caused as secretary in having to fill out official forms in Irish as his Irish was not strong. Forms had to be filled out exactly, and they lost an objection for a</p>
--	--

REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2

	<p>wrong word in Irish. But English used in real business, and dictionaries had to be used for the forms in later years.</p> <p>0:07:30 Describes lack of hurling in club in his youth. No real training as kids in football, you learned from the other players unofficially. There was one man called Aidan Manning who trained them in a modern way, but no formal coaching or training. Laps of the field for fitness.</p> <p>0:09:00 Players were fit though because their life kept them fit. He cycled or walked everywhere.</p> <p>0:10:20 They probably weren't homed the way modern players are and had no diet advice, but food was simple and healthy.</p> <p>0:11:00 Talks about injuries in his youth. He only got one bad injury – four broken ribs. Seemed like there were less injuries in the past – no hamstrings in those days.</p> <p>0:12:00 Describes treatment from Paddy Marry as a rub with Wintergreen – he can still smell it. Tells story of how the smell allowed the coach to tell he was injured. He still played and that was the only championship medal he ever won.</p> <p>0:13:30 Describes style of football in his youth. Not much tactics – just line out and play. Play on the outside. You could bundle keeper into net.</p> <p>0:14:20 Emphasis on kick outs. Seamus Kirk played with him – a great man to field the ball. Or fist it if he couldn't get it and you had to react to that.</p> <p>0:15:00 Describes tough nature of game in those days. Very hard knocks struck – get hit from behind when you picked up ball.</p> <p>0:16:00 Describes intensity of local rivalry with St Mochtas club in Louth Village and Cooley Kickhams – rivalries are based on jealousy with a club that's doing well. Also had rivalries with Annaghminnon Rovers Club and Shelagh.</p> <p>0:17:00 Describes role of local pare reports in GAA coverage and gathering to read the <i>Dundalk Democrat</i>. Depending on how you were mentioned in the paper you could be a hero but the other older players would knock that out of you.</p>
--	--

REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2

	<p>0:18:40 Communications in the GAA like that could be blunt and gruff, no PR skills.</p> <p>0:19:30 Describes being interested in all sports when young – horses, soccer, gathering on a Saturday to watch Match of the Day with friends and neighbours and arguing about sports. Even cricket or golf was interesting.</p> <p>0:21:00 Describes the wet battery wireless radio they had and listening to Micheal O’Hehir with the radio out on the windowsill and listening to the game with a crowd.</p> <p>0:22:00 Describes crowd around radio commenting on O’Hehir’s descriptions of incidents in games.</p> <p>0:22:30 Describes how everyone wanted to be O’Hehir in school on Monday morning. Everyone did their own version.</p> <p>“In our school there was forty Micheál O’Hehirs.”</p> <p>0:23:00 There was less media then so that was the only thing they had and Sean O’Ceallachain’s results programme. O’Hehir meant everything to the people he was talking to:</p> <p>“For the 1957 final, Micheál O’Hehir took me and put me in a chair in Croke Park. I wasn’t there but O’Hehir took me.”</p> <p>0:24:00 Describes how when he actually saw the games in Croke park, they weren’t as good without O’Hehir to tell the story. Maybe it wasn’t the same game, but the game as he saw it was better. He was part of your consciousness.</p> <p>0:25:00 Describes tension of being interested in GAA and other sports. He got away but it did effect his brother – he got suspended for life for going to a game in Oriel Park. He went as a kid and describes the note takers at the games looking for players to suspend.</p> <p>0:26:30 In the context of that time it was just the way it was. People accepted their place in society at that time and nobody rebelled. Priest could pick the team if they wanted. Few rebels at that time. The GAA ruled the roost and people lived for it and his friends would never have gone to Oriel Park because of it.</p> <p>0:28:00 Describes link between local GAA and Fianna Fáil. GAA was considered a republican organisation. Close to the</p>
--	---

REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2

	<p>border they were aware of politics and anti-Englishness.</p> <p>0:30:00 Describes GAA in Knockbridge as anti-English, pro 32 County and mainly Fianna Fáil, with a few Fine Gael.</p> <p>0:30:30 Describes leaving for America. Club gave him a gold watch and presentation. They had a do in the hall for him with speeches. He made a speech about Knockbridge, which he still remembers and quotes. The community rented a bus and they all came down to see him off at Dublin airport, which was emotional.</p> <p>34:40 Explains why he left Ireland for New York. There wasn't much emigration from his village.</p> <p>0:35:33 Was only in New York for one week before he was involved in GAA for Louth in New York. His uncle was disappointed when he saw him because he was small. They'd never met and didn't recognise him outside Gaelic park.</p> <p>0:37:00 Talks about the Louth County team in the 1950s and 1960s and the 1957 All-Ireland win. Listening on radio and quotes some of the commentary from the final. Reaction to the win was bedlam at school because the rumour was the Louth team would pass through Knockbridge the next day. Describes bonfire and burning tyres and the crowd waiting in the rain for the team to arrive. Team arrived at 1am. Dermot O'Brien gave a speech.</p> <p>0:42:00 His big heroes in GAA as a kid were (Michael) Huckle Byrne, a local man who played for Louth. Also Frank Lynch and Kevin Behan.</p> <p>0:43:00 Talks about the Louth club he joined in New York, beating dominant Kerry in a quarter final in 1963 in a packed Gaelic Park.</p> <p>0:44:00 Describes Gaelic Park pitch and facilities in 1960s. Pitch was terrible but the Park itself was the best place in new York. You could find a place to stay and a job and new friends or girlfriends. He met his wife there. There was dancing after the games with three or four hundred dancing. You could get dinner.</p> <p>0:47:00 Describes the fact that you could meet people from all over Ireland in Gaelic Park and you could express yourself as an Irish person. You just felt safe and at home. You could</p>
--	--

REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2

	<p>get help if you had a problem.</p> <p>0:48:45 Style of football in new York was tougher – field was small and you couldn't hide. Ollie Walsh once scored points from a puck out in the field it was so small.</p> <p>0:49:30 New York had great players then – Brendan O'Donnell, Brendan Tumulty, Kenn Finn, Paddy Casey, Martin and Tommy Furlong.</p> <p>0:50:00 Describes the different County teams in new York and how players without a county played for someone else. Kilkenny had a good football team and Sligo in New York were probably better than Sligo in Ireland with players from all over Ireland. They got to see the best players from Ireland when the All-Star teams came over to play.</p> <p>0:51:30 Describes a final when Tyrone played Cavan with 14 of the Kerry team from home playing on each side. Pat Spillane, Jack O'Shea, John Egan. Joke was it would have been cheaper to play the game in Shannon rather than flying the Kerry lads over.</p> <p>0:52:20 Describes make up of Louth team when he arrived – mainly from Louth with some Armagh boys. The Finn brothers were a key part of the team. Kenn Finn had played for Dundalk in soccer.</p> <p>0:52:50 He played mainly in goal and corner forward and played Senior football in four consecutive decades 60s – 90s. Last game in 1991.</p> <p>0:53:30 Describes difficulty in keeping Louth going as not that much emigration from Louth and the team folded when he was Chairman, which he feels sad about.</p> <p>0:54:10 He got involved in running Louth after being in new York about 10 years. There were senior men to run the club before that.</p> <p>0:55:00 Describes managing Louth and Frank McGuigan beating them on his own. Were forced to bring players over from Ireland towards the end. Describes his strategies for managing around getting the most from each player, and keeping opposite teams star players from contributing.</p> <p>0:57:30 Describes different strategies and set pieces to play</p>
--	---

REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2

	<p>in Gaelic Park.</p> <p>0:58:30 Describes problems caused by bringing of players to New York for weekend. You never knew who you were going to play. Money was involved and players sometimes left you to go for a bigger offer. They brought over several big names like Barney Rock.</p> <p>1:00:00 Tells story about bringing Willie Joe Padden over after raising a lot of money to play Tyrone. When they got to the airport Tyrone were there to meet Padden as well. He played for Louth in the end but didn't play too well and people wondered had he been nobbled.</p> <p>1:02:00 But bringing the players over was also good because the fans got to see the big names from Ireland. Was great for the old people to see these guys.</p> <p>1:03:00 But there was a catch 22 in that you needed to be competitive to attract the young American players, but you had to bring players over to be competitive.</p> <p>1:03:50 Talks about origins of bringing players over to new York. There were players brought over in 1960s. He remembers Kevin Moran playing for Tyrone after he signed for Man Utd.</p> <p>1:04:40 Tells story about Kenn Finn bringing players from his soccer team to fill out their team. Once he brought a brilliant player who turned out to be Gordon Bradley who was the manager of the New York Cosmos soccer team.</p> <p>1:06:00 Describes going to church on Sunday morning to see what new faces were there from Ireland for that day's matches.</p> <p>1:06:50 Describes commentating on matches in Gaelic Park and struggling to name all the new players just there for the weekend. Stephen Joyce of Galway was out but not meant to playing but Tommy names him anyway, and was cursed by Jackie Sammon, the manager.</p> <p>1:08:40 Describes how he started work as a commentator in Gaelic Park after Lefty Devine died. He already had an Irish radio show on Sundays in New York and got recruited into the job.</p>
--	---

**REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2**

	<p>1:10:00 Describes difficulties of commentating when you never knew who players were. Sometimes players couldn't remember the fake names they were given. He did the games straight and never did jokes or criticism. Took every game seriously and that earned him respect.</p> <p>1:11:45 Met wife by commentating on a camogie game she played in against Kilkenny.</p> <p>1:12:30 Describes the dangers of commentating and saying the wrong thing.</p> <p>1:13:30 He never described the fights or commented on whatever in matches.</p> <p>1:14:00 Comments on changes in commentating styles and technology of media coverage over the years.</p> <p>1:15:00 Talks about Micheal O'Hehir's special talent.</p> <p>1:15:30 Tells story about broadcasting All-Ireland final on radio through Fordham University and a listener thinking Micheal O'Muircheartaigh was speaking Gaelic.</p> <p>1:16:00 Tells history of radio coverage of All-Ireland's in new York and getting it put through on Fordham radio (WFUV).</p> <p>1:17:30 Describes doing the coverage for the final and people going to see them on the big screens where they were broadcast at the Universities.</p> <p>1:18:30 Describes technical difficulties of getting the lines from RTE to broadcast, and ending up ringing his brother in Dundalk and getting him to put the phone to the radio, or doing the commentary himself because the line broke down.</p> <p>1:19:30 Tells story of 1947 All-Ireland and Micheal O'Hehir begging to be kept on the air.</p> <p>1:21:00 Describes difficulty in keeping in touch with GAA back home when he came over in 1960s. That was one of the successes of his old radio show – he got the scores from his brother. People used to queue to get the local papers in Queens.</p> <p>1:22:30 Talks about the showing of All-Irelands in cinemas from 1970s and then Setanta. Problem with Setanta was that</p>
--	---

**REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2**

	<p>you had to go to pub to watch games.</p> <p>1:24:00 He stayed interested in Louth and the club back home, but at first even making a telephone call was a three day affair. He got the local papers from his mother every week. Letters were also important.</p> <p>1:25:40 Describes collapse of Louth club due to lack of numbers. Talks about new challenges because immigrants face huge challenges and massive difficulty living in new York illegally.</p> <p>1:26:00 Describes putting up players for Louth in various places and once having 11 in his aunt's apartment players out from Ireland.</p> <p>1:27:40 Describes relationship between clubs like Louth and the New York Board – importance of having a good delegate.</p> <p>1:28:30 There were always dodges and things going on and the potential for conflict and there was a lack of control over players.</p> <p>1:29:30 Describes poor relationship between New York board and the GAA at home in Ireland. Also change towards a better relationship in recent years especially with Minor Board.</p> <p>1:31:00 Describes happiness with going to Ireland to commentate on youth games when New York went to Ireland and sending the taped commentary home on the phone, which caused a fuss by tying up the phone.</p> <p>1:32:00 Describes impression a few words in a commentary can have on people – either years later or them assuming you're at the game in Ireland.</p> <p>1:33:00 Describes problems for New York in being competitive in Irish championship and problems with bringing illegal players to Ireland to play. Describes taking New York team in 1984 to play in Centenary year games. That was a good team.</p> <p>1:36:00 Talks about explaining the GAA to non-Irish Americans and his role as a soccer commentator for ESPN. Talks about how GAA could have been big in USA if they'd got it into the colleges like Notre Dame and Iona and other</p>
--	---

**REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2**

	<p>promotional ideas.</p> <p>1:38:30 Describes his best GAA memory as Louth 1957 All-Ireland win. Compares it to Armagh's win in recent years. Incredible to win a first title.</p> <p>1:39:45 Describes worst moments as a Dublin Louth match in the 1980s, when Louth were two points up but missed a sitter and Jimmy Keaveney went up the other end and scored a goal. Finished Louth for years after.</p> <p>1:40:45 Describes best game as a game in Gaelic Park in the 1980s between Tyrone and Cavan with lots of Kerry players from Ireland on both sides.</p> <p>1:41:40 Describes greatest team of his lifetime as Louth in 1957. Describes Mayo players who played on that team. He also admired first Down team to win All-Ireland and the Dublin team of Jimmy Keaveney</p> <p>1:42:20 His GAA hero would be Jack O'Shea as best player and also admires Mick O'Connell a contradiction of a man.</p> <p>1:43:00 Explains why GAA is one of the greatest organisations in the world for keeping so many kids out of trouble and kept them busy.</p> <p>1:44:50 Explains his main disappointment with GAA as being failing to engage with international dimension. You can't play for Ireland in GAA really.</p> <p>1:45:50 Explains what the GAA means to him as being his backbone, even though he's a soccer commentator.</p>
<p><b>Involvement in GAA</b></p>	<p>✓ Supporter ✓ Player ✓ Manager ✓ Coach <input type="checkbox"/> Steward</p> <p>✓ Chairperson ✓ Committee Member <input type="checkbox"/> Grounds-person</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Caterer ✓ Jersey Washer <input type="checkbox"/> Referee <input type="checkbox"/> None</p> <p>✓ Other (please specify): Broadcaster and live match commentator at Gaelic Park, New York</p>
<p><b>Record as a Player</b> (Titles won; Length of time played)</p>	<p>Played with Louth Minor team in 1963. Played for Louth in New York 1963-1991.</p>

**REFERENCE NO. LH/1/2**

<b>Record as an Administrator</b> (Positions held; how long for)	Chair of Louth GAA in New York.
<b>Format</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Audio <input type="checkbox"/> Audio-Visual
<b>Duration</b>	Length of Interview: 01:46:00
<b>Language</b>	English

**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:      1<sup>st</sup> July 2010