

GAA Oral History Project

Interview Report Form

Name of Interviewer	Seán Kearns	
Date of Interview	13 th Sept 2009	
Location	Gaelic Park, Bronx, New York	
Name of Interviewee (Maiden name / Nickname)	John Leahy	
<u>Biographical Summary of Interviewee</u>		
Gender	Male	
Born	Year Born: 1927 Home County: Kerry	
Education	Primary: Lixnaw NS	
Family	Siblings: 5: Second of six siblings. Current Family if Different: 3 Children	
Club(s)	Lixnaw [Kerry], Kerry New York [America]	
Occupation	Supermarket Manager and Coordinator	
Parents' Occupation	Road Steward	
Religion	Roman Catholic	
Political Affiliation / Membership	Labour Party	

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Date of Report	25 th May 2010
Period Covered	1930s - 2009
Counties/Countries Covered	Kerry, New York, Americas
Key Themes Covered	Travel, Supporting, Grounds, Facilities, Playing, Training, Managing, Coaching, Refereeing, Officials, Administration, Material Culture, Education, Religion, 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, All-Ireland, Club History, County History, Irish History, Earliest Memories, Family Involvement, Childhood, Impact on Life, Career, Challenges, Ban on Foreign Games and Dances, Professionalism, Retirement, Food and Drink, Socialising
Interview Summary	<p>John Leahy was born in Lixnaw, Kerry in 1927 and played hurling for the local club, Lixnaw, until he emigrated to New York in the late 1940s. The interview covers the role of the GAA in Lixnaw, which was dominated by hurling rather than football. The clothing and equipment used by players and the difficulty in acquiring hurleys, and the fields and facilities available in the 1930s and 1940s are discussed. The role of local politics, the Pioneers, teachers and the clergy within the GAA are also covered. Training and styles of play are discussed, as are the toughness of the game and injuries and treatment. The ban on foreign games and the role of the radio are covered, as is travel to see Kerry teams play. The shortages caused by the Emergency are also discussed. Emigration and the Irish experience in New York from the late 1940's onwards are key themes and the pitch and social life at Gaelic Park are discussed, as is John Kerry O'Donnell, who was a close friend of the interviewee. The social life and special place of the Pioneers and clergy in GAA in New York are also covered. The Clare Hurling Club in New York and the style and high-standard of hurling in New York in the 1950s are discussed with special reference to the 1958 hurling team, which Leahy was a selector on. The relationship between the GAA in Dublin and that in New York are also covered. The interviewee was drafted into the US Army and served in Korea and his continued involvement in the GAA</p>

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during this period is dealt with, as is the emigrant's ability to stay in touch with the GAA in Ireland, and trips home to see the All-Ireland. The changes to the GAA in New York since the 1950s and the role of Irish Americans and youths in the game are also discussed, and the example given by Chicago and Boston. The bringing of players out from Ireland is also mentioned and the interviewee tells a number of interesting stories about GAA figures including a American football kicking contest for Mick O'Connell, and the incident where Brendan Tumulty punched Australian Rules star Ron Barrasi.

0:00:20 Talks about early involvement with hurling in Kerry. Played Minor Junior and Senior for Lixnaw. Involved from age of 13 or so up in lots of ways.

0:01:00 That part of Kerry was all hurling, you had to go to somewhere else if you wanted to play football.

0:01:40 Family not really involved in GAA, used their energies in the IRA.

0:02:00 Talks about getting involved in GAA in New York and going to meeting down at 100th St. He was part of first group to start coming over after WW II. Huge numbers came from Lixnaw at that time.

0:03:00 Talks about Irish guys like him getting drafted to go to Korea when they arrived in America. He was there 10 months when he got drafted.

0:04:00 Talks about learning to play hurling in Kerry and lack of hurleys. Good story about going looking for an ash tree on Christmas day and borrowing a donkey cart to bring the trunk back to the carpenter.

0:05:30 You fixed your hurley whatever way you could – more valuable than your knife and fork. Shortage of other equipment and people played in pants tucked into socks and hobnail boots.

“If you got hit with a hobnail boot you'd need to see a psychiatrist, because it affected you brain as well.”

0:06:30 Talks about round-up of IRA by De Valera in 1939 – five of those rounded up in Lixnaw were the guys who would

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	<p>have trained the youths in hurling. Lixnaw had two clubs who were big rivals.</p> <p>0:07:35 Describes making your own sliotar out of corks.</p> <p>0:08:00 Lixnaw did have a field you could play on, but a farmer would give you a field to practice in and the team would weed for him in return. Or cut turf. There was no money, or help from the GAA then.</p> <p>0:09:30 Talks about role of Pioneers in the GAA then.</p> <p>0:09:50 Ex players helped to train you – he usually played half back.</p> <p>0:10:40 Describes getting a big hit in a match and his friend retaliating. Hurling then was less skilful and more common sense. Talks about high jump training.</p> <p>0:12:00 Talks about tactics of playing in backs then and different style of hurling from the modern game of hurling.</p> <p>0:13:00 No field to play hurling on at school and no real focus on developing skills, like there is today.</p> <p>0:14:00 Talks about relationship between clergy and teachers and the GAA in his youth.</p> <p>0:14:40 Talks about John Joe Sheehy, of Kerry, coming out to give talks and instructions.</p> <p>0:15:00 Describes lack of dressing rooms and changing in ditch or under trees. John Kerry O'Donnell should be praised for getting showers and facilities in New York, that were copied at home. They raised money for Irish clubs in new York through field days in Gaelic Park as well. Also sponsored flights back to Ireland to make money for clubs.</p> <p>0:17:00 Talks about politics in the club at home and election of Dan Spring getting elected for Labour party. Talks about Local Defence Force (LDF) activities during the Emergency.</p> <p>0:19:00 Describes injuries in the game as worse than in the modern game as the game was rougher and so competitive. Talks about all the various clubs in close proximity in his part of Kerry and the nature of the rivalry, not much bad blood.</p> <p>0:20:42 Talks about treatment for players with injuries. Local</p>
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	<p>nurse possibly as a volunteer. Hospital for serious injuries. Club would help out with bills. No helmets, shin guards or other safety equipment when he played in Kerry. People wore caps.</p> <p>0:21:55 Tell story about getting 'caps' in soccer and not being able to go to soccer games due to ban. Tells about priest called Terry Smith being last man banned for playing soccer. Talks more about ban.</p> <p>0:23:00 Talks about skittles – a game like baseball they used to play in Kerry – and tug of war, and greyhounds were also popular.</p> <p>0:24:00 Talks about following the Kerry County team and the first dry battery radios. His uncle had a windmill that charged dry batteries and there were always loads in for charging before a game.</p> <p>0:25:00 Talks about crowds gathering round the first radios in the community to listen to the matches and sitting on butter boxes. Tells story of how listening to the games could get people's tempers up in the 1946 All-Ireland.</p> <p>0:27:00 Probably a dozen radios in Lixnaw in 1945.</p> <p>0:27:40 Talks about going to see Kerry play in Kilrush in Clare in a car.</p> <p>0:28:30 Big GAA hero for them was Roundy Landers – who they knew, Jimmy Gorman, Fr James Pearse. There were local heroes as well like the Rices of Abbeydorney, and Tony McAuliffe.</p> <p>0:29:40 Talks about Shannon Rangers and Killarney playing out three draws and the various modes of transport used by the crowd to get to the games – carts and traps, bikes and horses due to fuel shortages during the War. The war put limits on lots of things – like wellington boots.</p> <p>0:31:00 Talks about effect growing up in wartime had on his generation – made them cagey. And lengths they went to get by and the effects of rationing.</p> <p>0:32:50 Talks about reasons for emigrating to America just after WW II, and lack of role of GAA in that decision.</p>
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	<p>0:34:00 He did know about the GAA in New York before he went because a team from New York visited Ireland during the Eucharistic Conference and had listened on radio to 1947 All-Ireland from Polo Grounds in New York with a big crowd in Kerry at a railway station.</p> <p>0:36:15 Talks about Cavan and Kerry coming to play celebration game in 1997 and brilliance of Maurice Fitzgerald: "You could have put him out in Coney island and he'd have scored from there."</p> <p>0:37:00 Describes getting involved with GAA in New York within about two weeks of arriving. He ended up hurling with Clare hurling club.</p> <p>0:37:50 Talks about different jobs he had when he arrived in New York – washing dishes, elevator boy and working way to management.</p> <p>0:38:30 Talks about his family life and death of his wife and daughter and remarriage to his best friend's widow.</p> <p>0:40:00 Talks about first impressions of New York GAA – the heat and sun burn. You had to learn a lot about life when you came over.</p> <p>0:42:30 Tells story about meeting a black doorman from Cork City.</p> <p>0:43:00 Talks about the drying up of emigration from Ireland to New York during World War 2.</p> <p>0:43:20 Talks about nuns and priests getting special seating in Gaelic Park. Crowds grew after the war – 25,000 attended one match in 1956.</p> <p>0:44:00 Talks about the various Irish dance halls across New York in the 1950s. There were lots of Pioneers in new York then too. There were 12 Pioneers on the travelling party for the 1958 New York hurling team.</p> <p>0:46:00 Talks more about travelling with that team. That 1958 team was one of the best hurling teams of all time. The footballers got cheated out of a St Brendan's Cup that year.</p> <p>0:47:30 Talks about relationship between GAA in New York and GAA back home during Kerry O'Donnell's period. Tells</p>
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	<p>story about a manager bringing over a player who complained about the lack of grass on Gaelic Park and was asked “Did you come to play football or graze?”</p> <p>0:48:50 Pitch at Gaelic Park was not good because it had such activity on it. O'Donnell used to send his wife and kids out on to the pitch to pick stones off it when he took over Gaelic Park first.</p> <p>0:50:00 Talks more about Kerry O'Donnell – he was hard to get on with but he was a good man. O'Donnell gave people money when they were stuck. He sent players money when they were away in Germany with the army. He put on good food for the players when they trained in Gaelic Park.</p> <p>0:52:00 Talks about the social life at Gaelic Park, with 2,000 people in to see the band. Felt like you'd never left home. They made a connection with the previous generation who came over in the 1920s.</p> <p>0:53:00 Talks about playing in New York in 1949, then getting drafted, then playing for Clare. Played into mid-1960s but then married and had kids and promotions in work.</p> <p>0:54:40 Describes standard of hurling in New York during his career, with lots of county players coming out from Ireland to live. Half his Clare team had played County in Ireland, four Kerry boys and two from Roscommon on that Clare team.</p> <p>0:56:20 Describes playing teams from the other big US cities.</p> <p>0:57:30 Hurling in New York was tough and competitive and the New York team itself was very strong. Talks about all the hurling teams in existence down the years.</p> <p>0:58:40 Talks about how the different county teams got their players, and teams that had control of jobs got the good players who'd emigrated from Ireland. GAA was a great networking tool in your job, a good way of meeting people and making connections.</p> <p>1:00:00 Describes extent of fundraising in New York for causes back home in Ireland.</p> <p>1:00:20 Talks about keeping in touch with GAA at home and importance of radio broadcasts of Micheal O'Hehir, broadcast via Fordham University. Then later televised at Hunter</p>
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	<p>College/Lehman College and at RKO studios. Huge crowds for those. Setanta and the computer are the thing now. He lives in Florida now and hard to see any GAA there.</p> <p>1:02:20 You could buy a video tape of the All-Ireland for 20 dollars, and he'd mail them to you. He gave some of them tapes to non-GAA people and they were amazed. He would show the tapes in his retirement community in Florida and put a notice up about it.</p> <p>1:04:20 Talks about building their church in Florida and fundraising.</p> <p>1:06:40 Describes going home from New York, organising chartered trips home as fundraisers, to see Kerry in the All-Ireland. You went for 9 days and back then the Americans were very welcome because they brought money.</p> <p>1:08:20 Describes changes in the GAA in New York in his time, they were steeped in GAA in their background. It's hard to keep Irish American children in the game if they're not talented. Describes carrying 15 kids in his station wagon to games and having to collect to go to McDonalds. Now the kids get to go home to Ireland to play.</p> <p>1:10:00 Talks about organising the tribute day to the New York hurling teams of 1958 and 1969.</p> <p>1:11:20 Talks about the GAA banquets in New York in his day and the county associations that existed for each county then, outside the GAA. The dances they had were packed and everyone dressed up.</p> <p>1:13:00 Talks about Pioneer Association meeting in New York.</p> <p>1:13:20 Talks about effect of lack of emigration and difficulties of illegals on the GAA.</p> <p>1:13:50 Talks about the great facilities developed in Chicago and Boston while New York GAA has to rent Gaelic Park. Chicago do weddings and have a waiting list for it. Chicago bar was built in Donegal and shipped over.</p> <p>1:15:46 Talks about struggles of hurling in North America. Very hard to get young Irish Americans to keep at it when</p>
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	<p>they can get a scholarship for lots of other sports.</p> <p>1:16:30 Talks about similarities between hurling and the game of lacrosse.</p> <p>1:17:00 Talks about GAA players on tour in USA getting a trial with the Boston Red Sox baseball as a publicity stunt. -</p> <p>1:17:55 Talks about putting together an Irish football team together from his army unit and coming down to play a challenge in New York.</p> <p>1:18:00 Tells story about his army sergeant trying to teach them to play baseball. He could hit it but forgot to drop bat when he did. His friend, Pat Foley, could hit a field goal in army boots from 47 yards. The army guys couldn't get over him curving his run before he hit a dead ball.</p> <p>1:20:30 Tells story about Pat Foley and him in the army, and his various duties in the Army.</p> <p>1:23:00 When he was in Korea he got letters from his wife, and she would pass on results or GAA news in her letters. Tells story about passing news of GAA to a fellow Irishman in Korea that caused an accident.</p> <p>1:24:30 Describes the bringing of players over from Ireland, first bringing over players permanently because they could get jobs in New York when times were tough in Ireland. Norman Allen of Dublin and other players, Mick O'Connell was over working construction and trained the minors, including John's son, who had his tracksuit criticised by O'Connell.</p> <p>1:26:45 Talks about the bringing of players over for the weekend. It brought in the crowds and the players got well paid, although some of the players who took in big money playing for New York teams now have the poison pen out for New York in the media in Ireland.</p> <p>1:27:45 Talks about amateurism and the challenges from Rugby and Soccer. Difficult to compete with that.</p> <p>1:28:30 Talks about changes in Ireland in terms of cost of living and financial scandals.</p> <p>1:30:50 Describes favourite GAA memory as touring with the</p>
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	<p>New York hurling team in Ireland in 1958 and beating the All-Ireland champions.</p> <p>1:31:00 Talks about acting as linesman for the first international game in New York between Australia and New York, when Ron Barassi elbowed Brendan Tumulty and Tumulty broke his hand punching Barassi in the face. Brother Gregory was the referee and asked John what he saw and John said "They ran into each other." Tells story of Tumulty later appearance on the Australian Television show 'This is your life' for Ron Barassi.</p> <p>1:32:30 Describes worst memory as an unnamed county player from Ireland out for the weekend who pulled on someone in retaliation and was suspended for life.</p> <p>1:33:20 Best game was that 1958 game or Kerry visiting team that played New York.</p> <p>1:34:00 Describes holding the American football for a place-kicking competition held in Gaelic Park between Mick O'Connell of Kerry and Roy Gerela, who was the place kicker for the Pittsburg Steelers American football team. O'Connell won it.</p> <p>1:34:30 O'Connell had plenty of practice with the American football before the contest.</p> <p>1:35:00 Describes the best team in his lifetime as the 1958 New York hurling team. Pat Clifford was on that trip and it was his first trip home since he escaped from prison. There was also a controversy over searching the plane.</p> <p>1:36:40 Describes a Kerry team going up to play a match in Canada and other stories about a team travelling in Malahide.</p> <p>1:38:15 Describes his GAA hero as John Kerry O'Donnell and Mick Morrissey of Wexford. Paddy Dowling of Cork and Mick O'Connell in football.</p> <p>1:39:00 Describes why he's proud of the GAA – it's the cogwheel that keeps athletics strong in Ireland. It's the best thing to watch. Talks about 2009 All-Ireland finals.</p> <p>1:40:00 No major disappointments with GAA. They've made great progress in Ireland with facilities from his day.</p>
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	<p>1:41:00 Explains what the GAA means to him – it gave him the desire to play and to try to be his best. It’s our legacy – he has a near museum to the GAA in his garage. He’s pleased he managed to get the celebration of the 1958 and 1969 New York hurling teams accomplished.</p>
<p>Involvement in GAA</p>	<p> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Supporter <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Player <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Coach <input type="checkbox"/> Steward <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chairperson <input 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): _____ </p>
<p>Record as a Player (Titles won; Length of time played)</p>	<p>1942 Kerry Minor Hurling Championship with Lixnaw GAA</p>
<p>Record as an Administrator (Positions held; how long for)</p>	<p>Selector for NY Hurling Team</p>
<p>Format</p>	<p> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Audio <input type="checkbox"/> Audio-Visual </p>
<p>Duration</p>	<p>Length of Interview: 1:42:00</p>
<p>Language</p>	<p>English</p>

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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 July 2010

