

GAA Oral History Project

## Interview Report Form

<b>Name of Interviewer</b>	Ann-Marie Smith
<b>Date of Interview</b>	24 <sup>th</sup> October 2008
<b>Location</b>	Virginia, Cavan
<b>Name of Interviewee</b> (Maiden name / Nickname)	Michael (Mick) Higgins
<b><u>Biographical Summary of Interviewee</u></b>	
<b>Gender</b>	Male
<b>Born</b>	<b>Year Born:</b> 1922 <b>Home County:</b> Cavan
<b>Education</b>	<b>Primary:</b> Kilnaleck, Cavan <b>Secondary:</b> Dundalk
<b>Family</b>	<b>Siblings:</b> N/A <b>Current Family if Different:</b> Married with children
<b>Club(s)</b>	Kilnaleck, Mountnugent, Baileborough and Tullyvin
<b>Occupation</b>	Guard
<b>Parents' Occupation</b>	Publican [Father]
<b>Religion</b>	N/A
<b>Political Affiliation / Membership</b>	N/A

REFERENCE NO. CN/01/01

<b>Date of Report</b>	7 <sup>th</sup> January 2009.
<b>Period Covered</b>	1920s-2008
<b>Counties/Countries Covered</b>	Cavan, New York, Kerry, Longford, Donegal, Kildare
<b>Key Themes Covered</b>	Childhood, Training, Travel, Celebrations, Retirement, Coaching, Refereeing, All-Ireland
<b>Interview Summary</b>	<p>The interview concentrated on Mick's playing years for Cavan during the 1940s and 1950s, these are considered to be Cavan's glory days in Gaelic Football. In 1947 Cavan travelled to New York to play Kerry in the All Ireland Football Finals. Their victory in the Polo Grounds ensured that Cavan would always be recorded in GAA history, as being the first and only county to date to win the All Ireland Final outside of Ireland. Mick spoke about travelling to and from New York, the game itself, their time in New York and the reception when they came back to Ireland. He spoke about retiring from football, his time as a referee and managing Cavan, Longford and Donegal. He spoke about his occupation as a guard, his family life. He also commented on some of the recent changes made by the GAA, such as the opening up of Croke Park to rugby and soccer.</p> <p>Start: Introduction to interview. Name of interviewee.</p> <p>0.38: Date and place of birth.</p> <p>0.46: Father was from Mayo and mother was from Cavan.</p> <p>0.52: The family came to Ireland and settled in Cavan.</p> <p>1.04: The father had a public house in Kilnaleck.</p> <p>1.12: Mick went to national school in Kilnaleck.</p> <p>1.30: He attended school in Dundalk and started playing football at 14 or 15 years of age.</p> <p>1.52: He went to Celbridge after 3 years in Dundalk and he played with the Kildare Minors that year.</p> <p>2.29: He returned to Kilnaleck after a year and a half in Celebridge.</p> <p>2.37: Mick played with Kilnaleck. The club had started in</p>

	<p>1941 and it was a young team.</p> <p>3.03: Peter Donohoe was also playing for the club in 1943 and a year later he was playing for the county.</p> <p>3.22: Mick says that club football was very rough and tough. He said that the club won nothing at all.</p> <p>3.38: The club broke up after a few years. Mick, Peter and Tony Tighe went to play with Mountnugent.</p> <p>3.50: Mountnugent won the Junior Championship and then they won the Senior Championship.</p> <p>4.06: No training done in the club. It was only when Cavan reached the All-Ireland semi final that the county team trained together. Cavan was one of the leading lights in football when Mick was playing.</p> <p>4.51: Mick spoke about travelling to matches: "If it was anywhere local, you cycled out to it. It was the end of the war years and motor vehicles were scarce and money would be hard to get."</p> <p>5.08: He used to cycle in to Breffni Park, Cavan, a distance of 12 miles.</p> <p>5.19: "Tis a totally different game now. The way they play now is different because there seems to be more emphasis on winning. We were more or less, well we'd like to win and I'd like to win but it wouldn't be the end of the world if we didn't. You wouldn't see anyone going down on their knees and hitting the ground. There would be another day some day."</p> <p>6.07: Mick was picked to play for the county at the age of 20.</p> <p>6.15: Jack Smallhorne was on a winning Cavan team and he was from Kilnaleck and in the evenings, Mick would kick the ball into Jack and he would score from different angles.</p> <p>6.33: Mick believes that at the present time, players are more into fitness. He believes that they devote a lot more time to fitness, whereas in his day, the focus was on scoring points.</p> <p>7.02: Mick believes that at the present time, there is too much emphasis on passing the ball rather than holding it.</p> <p>7.12: Cavan and Antrim the first counties to use the hand pass.</p> <p>7.38: During Mick's playing days, Cavan generally came</p>
--	--

	<p>through the Ulster Championship quite easily and it was only after the Ulster Final that the team got together to train.</p> <p>7.48: "It was easy to keep fit. There was no money. You went out and played football on a Sunday evening."</p> <p>8.15: Once you got to the semi final, there was pressure on the team to train.</p> <p>8.27: The trainer of the Cavan team was Hughie Reilly from Cootehill and he had been captain for the county the last time Cavan had won the All-Ireland Final. He trained Mick for four years.</p> <p>8.54: Mick talks about Hughie Reilly: "The first thing you were told was to play the game, not to be getting into rows. To play the game and play it sportingly. He was a great man for tactics. We'd have a run down on the opposition and you'd know their strong points and their weak points. And we'd try to dwell or play on the weakest end of the field. It didn't always work out that way but generally it did."</p> <p>9.44: Cavan was beaten by Dublin in the semi final in 1942 and drew with Roscommon in the All Ireland Final in 1943.</p> <p>10.12: Mick was a substitute in 1942.</p> <p>10.22: Mick talks about playing in Croke Park for the first time. "It never dawned on us where we going. I always remember a write up in a paper that Cavan was a young team and inexperienced and that Croke Park might not suit them. I always remember Billy Doonan, he was right full back and we were about to go out on to the field and he said "come on lads, if you can't play in Croke Park, you can play nowhere."</p> <p>11.34: In 1944 Roscommon beat Cavan in the semi final of the championship and a year later, Cavan got one step closer and made it to the final, only to be beaten by Cork.</p> <p>11.52: In 1946 Cavan were beaten by Antrim in the Ulster Final. It was a major disappointment for the team.</p> <p>12.25: Kerry and Cavan were the 2 best teams in Ireland at the time. Roscommon was the best team in Connaught and Meath and Dublin were the best teams in Leinster.</p> <p>12.56: Cavan beat Roscommon in the semi final.</p> <p>13.14: It was decided at Central Council at Easter Sunday that the All Ireland Football Final for that year, 1947 was to be played in New York. Cavan and Kerry had been playing in an exhibition game in Mitcham Park, London and only heard the</p>
--	--

news when they arrived back in Ireland. One of the Kerry players's shouted over to Mick before leaving and said "We'll meet again in New York."

13.50: The idea of playing the game in New York had been around for a while but had always been defeated by Congress. It was Canon Hamilton who succeeded in getting it passed in 1947.

14.14: Before playing Antrim in the Ulster Final in 1947, the Cavan came together to train. This was the first time they had trained for the Ulster Championship, but Antrim had beaten them in 1946 and the team was worried. Cavan trained for two weeks before the game and it paid off because Cavan beat Antrim.

14.41: Cavan played Roscommon in the semi-final and beat them, even though Roscommon were the hot favourites. This victory prevented Roscommon from winning their third All Ireland in a row. Mick said that game was considered to be one of the best games in a long time.

15.12: Mick said that when he was playing he never thought whether the game was great or not. He said as long as you were winning he didn't mind.

15.37: According to Mick the preparations for the trip to New York were quite simple. The Cavan team travelled by plane and some of the Kerry team went by boat.

15.51: It was a big thing to travel by plane. It was Mick's first time on a plane.

16.07: They flew from Rineanna, Shannon.

16.17: The Cavan team hired 3 or 4 cars from Floods of Cavan to travel to the airport.

16.28: Mick recalls that there was no one out on the streets as they made their way through Cavan to go to the airport.

16.56: The whole trip to New York took 27 hours. There was a delay of over 4 hours due to high winds and engine trouble.

17.41: Mick said that they were more tense travelling on the plane than playing the match.

17.56: The teams had a week to prepare for the match and they trained every other day. Mick recalls the intensity of the heat. It was 85 degrees at the time.

	<p>18.35: The pitch was small. It was a baseball pitch and there was no grass. The players had never trained on a concrete surface before. They did the same preparations as home but couldn't do as much due to the heat.</p> <p>19.38: The morning of the game, the Cavan team attended Mass as they always would as a team. When the team was playing a match in Dublin, they would stay in Barry's Hotel and go to Mass in Gardiner Street.</p> <p>20.06: The match in the Polo Grounds was delayed due to speeches. After 10 minutes Kerry was winning by 8 points to 2.</p> <p>20.44: Mick recalls that things began to sway in Cavan's favour. He scored a goal and Peter Donohoe scored 3 or 4 points.</p> <p>21.00: Mick recalls that one of the Kerry player's by the name of Dowling who was centre field and was having a good game, came down on his back on the hard ground and had to be taken off.</p> <p>21.22: The match was played in a very sporting fashion and the Kerry players were the first people over to congratulate Cavan.</p> <p>21.37: The American Press commented on this the following day and said that it was something seldom seen in games.</p> <p>22.05: Mick believes that the All-Ireland will never be played outside of Ireland again.</p> <p>22.20: The teams were in New York for 10 days after the game. The New York Police force provided them with police cars to allow them to visit their relatives or to go sight seeing.</p> <p>22.51: It took the teams 10 days to travel by boat back home to Ireland.</p> <p>22.59: Mick recalls the size of the boat: "Queen Mary, it was twice the size of Croke Park at least. It was a holiday in itself."</p> <p>23.30: The team had no idea of the excitement back home. "It was a big thing when you look back at it, but at the time you didn't think that much of it."</p> <p>24.39: Talking about the match again, Mick recalls that the Americans couldn't believe the sporting fashion it was played and they were also amazed at the speed of the game.</p>
--	---

	<p>25.19: The American public thought it was a wonderful final and the game was the talk of the hotels and bars.</p> <p>26.03: Mick's main memory of the game: "My main memory is the sensational start by Kerry and the thrilling finish by Cavan.</p> <p>26.43: After the game, a banquet was put on for both teams in the Commodore Hotel. 1500 guests attended. There was a banquet nearly every night.</p> <p>28.05: On arriving back to Dublin, there was a reception in Dun Laoghaire and a banquet in the Gresham Hotel that night.</p> <p>28.23: "It was then that I began to realise there was a big difference between victory and defeat."</p> <p>29.45: The following day, the Cavan team took the bus home. Great excitement with crowds coming out to welcome their heroes in villages like Mullagh and Virginia. Mick recalls "You'd wonder what all the excitement was about. Passed no remark. It's kinda the way you are built, you know."</p> <p>29.32: There was a banquet held in the Farnham Hotel, Cavan Town. Some of the team stayed a few nights but Mick had to return to work. He had been given 6 weeks off from the guards for the trip.</p> <p>30.02: There was no problem getting time off from the guards.</p> <p>30.44: Cavan's aim for 1948 was to win the title again. They wanted to win All Ireland's back to back.</p> <p>31.32: Cavan beat Louth in the semi final in 1948. They played Mayo in the final.</p> <p>31.42: Mick recalls it was a wild day. Cavan at one point were leading by 3 goals and 4 points to Mayo's no score. However in the second half, Mayo got a grip on the game and Cavan in the end only won by 1 point.</p> <p>32.53: There were not the same celebrations after the 1948 final. The following year Cavan was beaten by Meath. This was a huge disappointment as they were hoping for the 3 in a row.</p> <p>34.00: Cavan won the All -reland Final in 1952. Mick said the '52 team wasn't as experienced as the team in '47 and '48.</p> <p>34.10: In 1952, Mick was captain. He said that whoever was the longest serving member on the team was made captain</p>
--	---

	<p>and that is why he was chosen.</p> <p>34.37: Mick talks about being captain, "You'd be thinking about how you were going to play yourself. You wouldn't be giving out to anyone cause you might be the biggest culprit yourself. You might be the cause of being beaten. No emphasis on being appointed captain of the team."</p> <p>35.12: Mick said it was a proud moment when he picked up the Sam Maguire Trophy.</p> <p>35.19: The days leading up to the final in 1952, Mick had the flue. It was doubtful whether he would be able to play. He said though that everything went right on the day but that he was glad when the final whistle was blown.</p> <p>36.00: Mick scored 7 out of Cavan's 9 points that day.</p> <p>36.25: Mick's favourite score was against Mayo in the 1948 final.</p> <p>37.03: Mick recall's his speech as captain after the final in 1952: "You thanked this one and that one. My speech was very short, I can tell you. It was a wet day and I didn't like keeping people out in the rain."</p> <p>37.43: Mick recalls when he realised it was time to think about retiring from inter-county football. Cavan were playing Mayo and it was a wet day. The ball came towards him, but a Mayo player hopped in, in front of him and took the ball. Mick said to himself that it was time to pack it in.</p> <p>38.22: On retiring as an inter-county player, he says "No remark was passed. No one said "thank you." That was the end of it."</p> <p>38.57: Mick had no regrets of giving up.</p> <p>39.02: He played for Baileborough as he was stationed there.</p> <p>39.15: He was transferred to Tullyvin station and he played for the club there.</p> <p>39.29: In 1955, Mick gave up playing football for good.</p> <p>39.44: He kept in contact with former players as he would meet them at matches.</p> <p>39.47: He was a referee for a while but he said he wasn't good at it, because he was more interested in the game than keeping an eye on the players and what they were doing.</p>
--	---

	<p>40.03 He acted as a referee at both club and county level.</p> <p>40.38: Mick trained the Cavan team and also spent 3 years training Longford and a year training Donegal. He successfully brought Donegal to the Ulster Final and it was the first time they won the Ulster Championship.</p> <p>41.23: While training Longford, he had to meet Cavan in the League. Longford won and this didn't go down too well among some of the Cavan supporters.</p> <p>41.43: Cavan was always his first preference. He had told the Longford County Board this fact on taking the job, but he didn't think that he would be facing Cavan in the League semi final.</p> <p>42.09: He trained Cavan for around 10 or 12 years.</p> <p>42.31: He said it was easier being a manager than a referee. If you made a mistake as a referee you would hear about it.</p> <p>43.05: When he was a referee he paid more attention to the forwards and was harder on the backs.</p> <p>43.51: Mick admired Jackie Lyne from Kerry, Billy Goodison from Wexford and Eugene McDonald from Monaghan.</p> <p>44.52: Other Ulster teams at the time had maybe 6 or 7 good players, whereas Cavan had an all round team. However currently, the other Ulster teams are doing well and Cavan is back pedalling.</p> <p>45.24: It is hard to explain why Cavan has declined so badly.</p> <p>45.32: According to Mick, Cavan have the biggest and best support in the country.</p> <p>46.05: Today both soccer and rugby are popular in Cavan. In Mick's day, there was only Gaelic Football.</p> <p>48.48: There was no hurling in Cavan when Mick was young. Now they have a junior team and Mick believes this is a good start.</p> <p>47.19: Mick believes that Billy Goodison and Jackie Lyne were natural footballers. They were fast and well built.</p> <p>48.34: The GAA didn't interfere with Mick's personal life. Being a guard in his day was quieter than today.</p> <p>49.04: Mick was aged 22 when he went into the guards. He was based in Drogheda, Baileborough and Tullyvin.</p>
--	---

	<p>49.42: "When I look back on it, I did devote a lot of time to the GAA."</p> <p>49.53: Mick has no regrets about devoting so much time to the GAA. He never had any serious injuries and he enjoyed the game.</p> <p>50.12: His wife is from Meath and she is also interested in Gaelic Games.</p> <p>50.29: His son and three girls would talk about Gaelic Football from morning until night, but Mick says that he rarely talks about it. His son did play for a while but quit because he was constantly being compared to his father.</p> <p>51.16: The girls played camogie.</p> <p>52.20: The 1952 semi final against Cork was a game that Mick really enjoyed. He also enjoyed the Railway Cup Matches as there was no negative football. Crowds of 30,000 or 40,000 would attend these matches.</p> <p>53.09: Mick played Railway Cup from 1943-1953. The Ulster team was made up of nearly all Cavan players. Mick recalls that in one year there were 12 Cavan players on the team.</p> <p>53.41: Mick believes that the Kerry team with Pat Spillane and Eoin Liston was the greatest team. One footballer was as good as the other. They didn't need any training at all.</p> <p>55.26: Mick has no regrets. He does believe though that the GAA never looked after their injured players properly. Mick believed that they should have had an insurance company of their own.</p> <p>56.14: Mick was all in favour of Croke Park opening up to rugby and soccer.</p> <p>57.00: On the GAA, Mick says "still it is the backbone of the country." Croke Park is the last word.</p> <p>57.40: Mick recalls playing against Mayo and it was said that 22,000 were locked outside the ground.</p>
--	--

<p><b>Involvement in GAA</b></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</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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> Referee <input type="checkbox"/> None</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p>
<p><b>Record as a Player</b> (Titles won; Length of time played)</p>	<p>3 All Ireland Medals for Cavan, 1947, 1948 and 1952. He played for the Kildare Minors. He played 10 years with the Cavan Senior team. He played with a number of clubs including Kilnaleck, Mountnugent, Baileborough and Tullyvin. He also played Railway Cup Football with Ulster.</p>
<p><b>Record as an Administrator</b> (Positions held; how long for)</p>	<p>Managed Cavan team for approx 10 years, managed Longford for 3 years and Donegal for 1 year. He was a referee for a short time.</p>
<p><b>Format</b></p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Audio <input type="checkbox"/> Audio-Visual</p>
<p><b>Duration</b></p>	<p>Length of Interview: 58 mins 20 secs</p>
<p><b>Language</b></p>	<p>English</p>

**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:     \_\_\_Ann-Marie Smith\_\_\_\_\_

Date:       \_\_\_2<sup>nd</sup> February 2009\_\_\_\_\_

