

Transcript of interview with Carmel Larkin

Interviewer: Mary Cunningham

Date: 24 January, 2020

Location: Carmel Larkin's home

Length of Interview: 26 minutes

The following items were copied and submitted by Carmel for the archive:

PHOTOGRAPHS

- 1: Agnes and Tom (Rock) Reddington–Carmel's foster parents
- 2: Carmel (aged 7) with foster sisters Maureen (left), Sara Ann and building contractor. (Photo was taken during the construction of the new house.1958)
- 3: Carmel (aged approximately 13) with foster parents
- 4: Carmel (aged 18) with foster parents and unidentified visitors
- 5: Tom Reddington with visiting priest outside the old house

DOCUMENTS

FILE 1

Docs 1-32 (14, 29, illegible)

- 1,2: List of documents covered by F.O.I request
- 3-12: Notes and correspondence re maintenance and application for hotel training
- 13,18,19,22: Correspondence from foster mother to Nancy McEvilly
- 15,16: Correspondence from St Louis Convent re school fees
- 17: Note re school. transport
- 20,21: Correspondence from Castlebar Vocational School re fees
- 23,24: Bi-monthly report by Children's Officer Nancy McEvilly (Feb '66-June '67)
- 25-28: Correspondence re maintenance and school fees
- 30: Correspondence from St Louis Convent re school fees
- 30,31: Correspondence from St Louis Convent re school report

FILE 2**Docs 1-45 (4 illegible)**

- 1,2: Correspondence re application for Mulranny Hotel Training Course**
- 3,10: Correspondence from foster mother to Nancy McEvilly**
- 5,6: Bi-monthly report by Children's Officer Nancy McEvilly (Dec 63- Dec '65)**
- 7,8,9: Correspondence re school placements and maintenance**
- 12-15: Correspondence from St Louis Convent to Nancy McEvilly**
- 16: Correspondence from foster mother to ? re application for place in St Louis Convent, Balla.**
- 17,23,24: Correspondence from principal of Knocksaxon N.S**
- 18,19: Bi-monthly report by Children's Officer Nancy McEvilly (Dec 60-Sept '63)**
- 25: Correspondence from foster mother to ? re placement in Knocksaxon N.S**
- 26: Note re brief illness**
- 27,28: Covering letters**
- 29-45: Boarding out contract; correspondence and forms re boarding out of Winifred Carmel Smith**

FILE 3**Docs 1-15**

- 1: 1: List of documents covered by F.O.I request**
- 2,3,4: Application form and correspondence re tracing application**
- 5: Details from Tuam Home register**
- 6-13: Forms and correspondence re tracing enquiry**
- 14: Letter from Carmel to the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation**
- 15: Page from Tuam Home register**

FILE 4**Docs 1-18**

- 1-4: Newspaper article- Daily Star Nov 2016**
- 5: Marriage record of Thomas Smyth and Bridget Connell, parents of Sara Winifred Smyth (Smith)**
- 6,7: Genealogy maps**
- 8: Baptismal record of Patrick Smyth (no 411) brother of Sara Winifred Smyth**
- 9,10,11: Correspondence from Community Healthcare West**
- 12: Letter from Carmel to Katherine Zappone**
- 13: Details from Tuam Home register**
- 14: Notes**

15: Castlebar Death Register 1962—death record of Winifred Smith (no 134)

16,17: Details from Tuam Home register

18: Carmel's Baptismal Certificate

FILE 5

Docs 1-46

1-5: Tuam Home Record of Carmel's birth

6-10: Ballina birth records of children born to Thomas Smyth and Annie Smyth (Hughes) Mullaghawney

11-46: Copies of Tuam Home admission and discharge registers in respect of Winifred Carmel Smith and her mother Winifred Smith.

MC: It's the 24th of January 2020. This is Mary Cunningham and I'm doing an interview with Carmel Larkin as part of the Tuam Home Oral History Project being overseen by Galway university. Carmel was previously known as Winifred Carmel Smith and she is a survivor of the Home. We are in Carmel's home in Tuam today.

We can make a start Carmel with your story wherever you want to pick up.

CL: I was born in the Mother and Baby Home in 1949. On the records it says I was delivered by a doctor, I was seven pounds in weight and I was born at eight o'clock in the evening. **[See items #1-5; #11-46 FILE 5]** I stayed in the Mother and Baby Home until I was about five, and then I was fostered to a family in Mayo by the name of Reddington.

It was Tom Reddington and Agnes Reddington and they had lost a baby boy previously. They intended to adopt or foster a baby boy, but there was none available, and that's how I came to the home. They were in their fifties, they already had two grown up daughters, one was sixteen and I think the other was nineteen. **[See photos #1, 2 listed above]** The sixteen year old went to England shortly after I came out. She was very very jealous of me and we never saw eye to eye even to this day. She just hated me. With that, I only had a foster sister in America and I had very little contact with her. Anytime I did meet her she was always very pleasant. The other one lived in Kerry and we never contacted each other, only when we went to funerals and that was very rare.

My upbringing was very good because my mother was a very frugal woman and my father was a hard working man. He worked for the local council with the horse; a horse and cart. There was no addiction in the home, so whatever money came into the house it went on food and towards building a new house, which they did. We moved into that when I was seven in 1958. **[See photo #5 listed above]**

I always had my own bedroom. It was a four bedroomed house, brand new. When they built the house the rural electrification came at the same time so we had electricity in the house. We also had running water and a toilet which was very rare in those days in rural Ireland.

I went to a school about two and a half miles from the house; it was Knocksaxon. We had a very good teacher there, Mrs Dunleavey and also another teacher Miss Walsh. They were very good teachers for the children. Mrs Dunleavey was a bit strict alright, we got many a slap from her, but at the same time she was a very dedicated teacher and only wanted the best for her pupils.

Then I left there and I went to Balla convent, and at that time while you were living with foster parents, the law was that you were to be educated to either sixteen or eighteen. So I was educated to eighteen, but I absolutely hated the nuns. They always told me I was stupid. I wasn't stupid. I was a foster child and they looked down on people with any marks like that. The state payed for my education so I was just as equal as any other child. They did not like the children from rural Ireland. Anybody from the country was stupid to the nuns.

I left there then and I went to the Vocational school in Castlebar for a year. What I learned in that year stood to me to this present day. I did Domestic Science and I loved it. Our teacher wrote a book in Gaelic and he read it and it was really lovely. That was the happiest year of my life in school. **[See items listed in File 1, File 2 relating to maintenance, school placement, school fees, school, reports, school transport]**

After that then, my mother got a stroke. I was down in Achill working—Nancy McEvilly got me a job there.

[See photo # 4 listed above; items #1.2 FILE2] It was in a hotel, we had a social life, we went out dancing with other girls, it was good. I came up to visit my mother. She had a stroke, her daughter was there. She couldn't talk and she couldn't move, it was quite a bad stroke. So I couldn't communicate with her. She [the daughter] obviously got my father to sign over the house and the land in return for looking after them. Once she got the place in her name she gave me four days notice to get out of the house. She more or less quoted Cromwell's words, 'To hell or to Connaught'. It was either get out of the house, go to England, or whatever you like, but get out of here. That was it. That's the one [foster sister] I never got on with.

I went to England, and lucky enough I went to a niece of my foster mother. She was happily married in England with three children. It was like home from home. I was very happy there, they loved me, because my father was a very jovial character and when they asked me questions they felt they were talking to my father because he was a very funny man. Also I had all those sayings like 'quench the light' when it was 'switch off the light'. They found that very amusing. They were all from Mayo. I used to get very annoyed with them because they had long legs, and they'd stretch the long legs out and I'd be tripping over them. They'd be teasing me about my short legs, and I always told them my short legs got me where I wanted to go. That was the kind of environment I was in, it was fun, it was loving and I used to play with the kids and take them out shopping, do messages for them, and that kind of thing.

I was there for two years. My first job in England was in Woolworths. I worked a couple of months in Woolworths, and then I went into an office job. England was a new lease of life to me because I wasn't dictated to or controlled. My mother was a very controlling person and if she told you to do something you did it, and you didn't look back either not like today. I found it great because I could go to dances, I could go visiting, I could go here and there and I didn't have to answer to anybody. There was no drink in those days in England. If you went to a dancehall you got a mineral or a cup of tea. If a boy bought you a mineral it was sixpence and you never forgot him because it was a very big treat. While I spent twelve years in England, I never received a Christmas card or any correspondence from my father. When I wanted to come to Ireland to meet him I had to stay in a neighbour's house in Mayo. He would come and visit me there.

Now, what else do you want?

MC: Can you just cast your mind back? What's your earliest memory? You have nothing of the home, have you?

CL: No

MC: Arriving at the foster home, have you memories of that?

CL: No, the only thing I used to say to them when I came out of the home was—I used to talk about two nuns, Sr. Meeonta(???) and Sr. Manigma (???) [*unsure of spelling*]

MC: Can you say again?

CL: Meeonta, it's french, because they were a french order. I don't know how you'd spell it. And Sr. Manigma. Funny them two names stayed in there.

Also there was a man cycling up the road on a bicycle one day shortly after I coming out of the home, and I said, 'That's Fr. Murphy.' This man was married with about five or six children, and people used to tease him that the girleen in—my father had a nickname, because there was a lot of Reddingtons in the area, so he was known as Rock Reddington—and they said, 'The girleen in Rocks is calling Jimmy Ruane Fr. Murphy'. They teased him about it because he was anything but a priest, he was completely the opposite.

When I came out, my father often told me that I was a skeleton, a *tráithnín* (*thrawnneen*). [a withered stalk of meadow grass]. I told them that one slice of loaf did four children for their tea. He said that I never asked for any food. I ate what I got and that was it. I also had never seen a cat or a dog or a man. As soon as I'd see anything like that, I'd nearly back into the fire. So our life within the Mother and Baby Home was obviously within four walls and we were never taken anywhere.

My earliest memory, really, is wetting the bed and getting hammered for it. When I spoke to other members in my group and elsewhere about wetting the bed, they all wet the bed when they came out of the Mother and Baby Home, boys and girls. So it obviously was from fear. I have spoken to

a lot of survivors from different angles. Some of them remember the Mother and Baby Home but I don't.

MC: You just mentioned there in the tape, Nancy McEvilly who got you the job, can you just explain who Nancy McEvilly was.

CL: Nancy McEvilly would be known today as a social worker, but I think in those days they called them relief officers. She was with me from the day I went to Reddingtons until the day I left Reddingtons. That was my social worker all along and her record of my time in Reddingtons is impeccable. **[See items # 23,24 File 1; # 5,6, 18, 19 File 2]**

MC: Do you remember Nancy? Had you a relationship with her?

CL: Kind of, but she never took me aside and talked to me.

MC: But you remember her visiting?

CL: Oh I do of course, and getting clothes from her. I got clothes twice a year, It will be on the file there that I got clothes twice a year. I was very well clothed, and I was very very well fed because they were self sufficient. They had their own bog, their own potatoes, their own grain. My mother baked every day. There was always plenty of money and there was always plenty of food. It's just she was very frugal with money and she gave me a great indication as to how to manage a home and how to manage money. Even when I was rearing my kids I always kept money aside and even when I was in England—because my foster parents died when I was quite young, I had a bank account and I split my wages three ways, savings, accommodation and social. I learned that from her. **[See photo # 3 listed above]**

MC: How to budget.

CL: To budget, yeah. I was good with money. I was very good with accounts.

MC: Just to go back to your foster parents. You were saying there that they lost a child, a boy. Was that shortly before they fostered you?

CL: I'd say it was a good while ago because their youngest daughter was sixteen. My mother wasn't young when she got married, but she obviously never got over the death of the boy.

MC: What age was he when he died?

CL: I've no idea. They never told me about him, they never talked about things like that in those days. If you want a photograph of my foster parents, it's out there in the room , I'll bring it in to you. You will see there that they are elderly.

MC: I think you said before we started to record that they really wanted a young teenage boy.

CL: A boy around fourteen yeah, to help them with the land.

MC: So then, there must have been something about you as a small girl that they—

CL: I'd say my father fell in love with me once he saw me, because we were very very close. Anywhere he was I was. If he was in the field, if he was in the bog, if he was out in the barn watching a cow calving, if he was grooming the horse, I was there. I had no relationship with my mother, but I had a very good relationship with my father. He was a very decent man. I've heard of children being abused by their foster parents or abused by relatives in the family, he protected

me. I was like his own child. I never felt I was fostered, I just felt he was my father and he's the only father I have ever had experience with. A very kind man. If he was going for a wee and you said, 'Where are you going Daddy?', he'd say, 'I'm going to see a man about a dog.' That kind of language, personal space was never discussed, there was always an excuse. He'd never say, 'I'm going for a wee,' or anything like that, he'd say, 'I'm going to see a man about a dog.'

MC: Did he die shortly—?

CL: He died two years after the wife.

MC: After your mother. Was that when you were asked to leave?

CL: No I was asked to leave when my mother got the stroke, when I was eighteen, over eighteen. But she got her excuse, you see, she wanted the place.

MC: Did you get to see your foster father following that then?

CL: He used to come and meet me in Mayo, I wouldn't go to Kerry to her because that was an awful thing to do to me, to throw me out of the house. I was fifteen years in that house.

MC: So your foster father moved to Kerry with his daughter.

CL: He did and he was heartbroken. He was seventy when he moved to Kerry. I'm seventy today, I wouldn't like to move to a place in the middle of the country with no neighbours or nothing. Where he lived there was neighbours and a public road. He used to stand out on the road smoking the pipe and talk to everyone that went by.

MC: The other thing you were speaking to me about, before we started the recording, was about trying to find your birth mother. So just for the record can you tell me about that?

CL: I've got two stories about my birth mother. One of them is that she died in St Mary's [Castlebar Psychiatric Hospital] and she's buried in a mass grave. The other is that she was fifty-two years of age, she had medical problems and we think it's TB, and she was buried in her own family plot in Ballina. But I have no follow up records to explain that. I can't do a digging of the grave because there's too many bodies in it to do DNA. [test]. So, it's a question—is she buried in Ballina or is she buried in a mass grave in St Mary's? I can't get any answers to that. I have actually applied to St Mary's, I must look it up next week, for her medical records while she was in St Mary's. **[See item #15, File 4]**

MC: You are certain that the person who was admitted to St Mary's was your mother?

CL: Well, I'm ninety percent. I've no photos, I've nothing of her, absolutely nothing. Whatever family she had, they are supposed to have passed away as well. There doesn't seem to be any children. Because Catherine Corless looked for the sisters and brothers to see did any of them have siblings and we haven't found anything.

MC: Just for our records as well—you went to Mayo, the reason being your parents were from Mayo? So that was the regulation at the time? **[See items #26-45 FILE2]**

CL: That was it. That the money that was given to the foster parents to look after the foster children, that it came from the county that the child was originally from. That happened in Mayo, it may not have happened in any other county, I don't know.

We were in Merlin Park there recently, and we were talking about records and things like that, and they maintained that the Mayo records was impeccable and that was only because Nancy McEvilly was in that area and she was in charge. They maintained that Mayo produced the best records. Some counties produced nothing.

MC: Can I ask you, as you mention Nancy McEvilly, and you're saying about the clothes that you got twice a year, did she bring the clothes or did she give the money to buy them?

CL: No, she gave the money and then she came out to check that they had been bought. They were bought, I did wear them, there was nothing underhanded.

MC: Okay. That's as much as you have now?

CL: For today anyway.

MC: Well you have given me quite an amount of documents. You were saying that the record from when you were fostered is quite—

CL: Intense, yes. What's in the file about me being stupid or small for my age, which I was small for my age, I'm only five foot—some of the stuff in the records is not the truth. At a later date, I'll point out to you—when you can go through the records you can put on one of those stickers and ask we questions about it,.

MC: Yeah, we might return to the recording at that point

CL: Whatever.

MC: Just in your schooling, when you went to St Louis in Balla, you were a day pupil, were you?

CL: Yes, thank God, I was a day pupil.

MC: How long were you there?

CL: Two years.

MC: And then you moved to the Vocational.

CL: Yes. Then I was eighteen and I didn't have to be educated after that.

MC: So you stayed in primary until you were thirteen or fourteen?

CL: Fourteen, yeah. They kept me an extra year in primary because they maintained I wouldn't be able to go to the convent unless I stayed another year. **[See items # 23-26 File 2]** I only stayed an extra year in primary to help my mother with the land, because the holidays was long. That's the only reason for that, nothing to do with me, because one year extra in school did not do that much for a child.

MC: And your experience in primary and secondary with the others in your class, your peer group, was it a good experience?

CL: They were fine. I was never bullied going to school, I was never told I was fostered, there was nothing like that. Some of the survivors have experience of being bullied and being spoken down to by people in the village. I wasn't, and the only reason I can vouch for that is because the people had a different attitude, but also because my parents had money, and money talks. Do you know what I mean, you're not downtrodden, you're looked up to more than anything.

MC: So, overall anyway, the fostering experience was positive for you.

CL: Oh yes, it was good. As I said, I never had a relationship with my mother, I never remember her cuddling me or anything like that, but I do remember sitting on my Dad's knees and combing his hair, and that kind of thing. There was a very strong bond there between the two of us.

MC: Right Carmel, thanks very much for that. As I said, we might return to the record again if needs be.

CL: I think it will be interesting for you to have a look anyway, and whoever else is doing research with you, if there is anyone else doing interviews. I think it is important that you get an idea of—when you get good records, to go through them and compare, we'll say down the road, maybe with other counties and areas where the records aren't as good. The fact that you have a good record gives you an outline of what went on in the foster home between the child and the parents. Some children were very badly abused especially if there was an addiction issue there. [REDACTED] from [REDACTED], she went and she worked—she was with [REDACTED] and she had no teeth at twelve.

MC: You mean [REDACTED]

CL: He [REDACTED] had a foster child, and she got an awful time there.

MC: I know the stories, they vary—

CL: Oh, they do, yeah, but [REDACTED], it would put the hair standing on your head, what she went through. She didn't even have a decent bed or a decent room. They really treated her badly, it was terrible what they did to her.

I was lucky, and all the children in my area that was fostered—it was very common when I was fostered. There was two little girls in one house, there was another girl in another house, there was a man in another house. Foster children were fairly common in Mayo, for one reason or another, so they were never looked down on or never belittled by anybody that I know.

MC: Do you think that some of the people were doing it for economic reasons, that they were getting money for fostering?

CL: Well, I know two people that couldn't have babies.

MC: So that was one reason.

CL: That was one reason. One woman, she couldn't have babies and she had two girls. Her husband died when they were quite young, and when she died she left the place to the two girls. So, they sold it and divided it.

There was another lad then, [REDACTED] he was fostered solely for work, but he ended up being left in the home place until he died, because the foster parents' children, they were in England, and he was in Ireland looking after the foster parents. He looked after them until they died. The children in

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England said, 'You stay in the house [REDACTED] and we'll come home, and we'll have a holiday here every year.' So, he was one of the lucky ones as well.

I used to go to school with another girl, the girl that the mother couldn't have children. It was quite common to have foster children.

MC: Would all of those have come—would the Tuam Home be the place where they came from?

CL: I would say so.

MC: So everyone in the area, if there was somebody in Mayo, it was the Tuam Home they went to?

CL: There was no other home, you see, in the west of Ireland. But, there was supposed to be a Mother and Baby Home in Westport, there was something about it there recently, that it was a Mother and Baby home at one time. I must look into it, I must have a chat with Catherine Corless about it.

MC: How far were your foster parents from Tuam? The area where you grew up, how far was it from Tuam?

CL: I'd say it was about fifty miles.

MC: And you think your mother came originally from close to Ballina.

CL: Ballina. Any information I have, it's going back to Ballina, Breaffy, Ballina, and that's what's on my birth certificate as well, that she was from Breaffy, Ballina. But, when I went down to Breaffy, there was no trace of her.

MC: You were saying your baptismal cert that you got was sent to a parish—[See item#18, File 4]

CL: It was sent to the Cathedral parish in Ballina, and it was the priest who was there when I went down to find out about my mother, he sent in the post to me a couple of days later. Definitely she's from Ballina.

MC: That parish, do you know where it is?

CL: Breaffy. I've been down there, but nobody seems to know anything about her. It would add up that she left a young girl and ended up in a psych hospital, because if she did that, they wouldn't talk about her. It would be a dead subject.

MC: Okay, will we leave it at that for now? Thanks very much for your time Carmel.

CL: Not at all.

5 February, 2020

I met with Carmel to review the transcript and to clarify some of the content of both the documents and the interview.

I asked her about her recollection of incidents in her childhood when she wet the bed and 'got hammered for it.' She explained that it was her foster mother who punished her, but she believes that the foster mother thought that this was the right approach and didn't have any understanding of the trauma Carmel had experienced.

Nancy McEvilly noted that she advised the foster mother to explain 'the facts of life' to Carmel **[#6, FILE 2]**. In a later report McEvilly notes that she told Carmel the 'facts of life' in her office in Castlebar **[#23, FILE 1]**. Carmel does not recall any conversations relating to sex education, though she does remember going to the office in Castlebar. She recalled that the nuns in Balla did provide some sex education.

A letter her foster mother had sent to Nancy McEvilly stated that Carmel was spending weekends at the Connors house. She wanted this to stop and asked Nancy McEvilly to help. **[#13, File 1]** Carmel explained that this was when she had a got a weekend job in a shop in Ballygarry. The job only lasted a few weeks as she was not allowed to continue. There was a pub attached to the shop and Carmel believes her foster mother was worried about her being in that environment as she was only sixteen. Carmel said that she was vulnerable at that age and believes she would not have been able to deal with sexual advances had she encountered any.

Carmel spoke in her interview about feeling free in Achill, and later in England, to go to dances and socialise. When asked if she was very restricted growing up in comparison to her peers she said she was. She was only allowed go to the cinema in Balla once a week and was not allowed go to dances. Nancy McEvilly noted that Carmel asked her if she could attend dances during the holiday time. Nancy advised her to wait until she was eighteen. **[item #6, FILE. 2]**

A letter to the Department of Health states that Carmel was not taking up a hotel training course in Mulranny as 'she had not a flair for this type of work'. The letter goes on to say that she had emigrated to England on 27 October, 1967 with her foster sister to take up a post as a filing clerk. **[item #5, FILE 1]** . Carmel said that this is not a true and described her circumstances at that time

She left for England after her foster mother's stroke and following instructions from [REDACTED], who intended to sell the house. She was accompanied by a neighbour, [REDACTED] who was returning to London. She had contacted her foster mother's niece to ask for accommodation. She didn't know the woman very well, but she was welcomed into the house. Carmel believes that the relative in London was very critical of the way her cousin had treated Carmel. When I asked why the letter would have given a different account, Carmel explained that it is what would have been acceptable for Nancy McEvilly. She believes that Ms McEvilly would not have allowed her to go to England without a relative.

Carmel remained in London for twelve years before returning to the area where she grew up. She believes people in the locality felt she had been badly treated by her foster sister.

I confirm that this is a true record of the interview

.....
Carmel Larkin

Date.....