

Transcript of interview with Michael O’Flaherty

Interviewer: Mary Cunningham

Date: July 24 2020

Location: Flannery’s Hotel Galway

Length of Interview: 17 minutes

The following items were copied and submitted by Michael for the archive. Some documents are redacted at his request.

DOCUMENTS

FILE 1

Docs:

- 1: Letter from TUSLA adoption services (Sept 2017)**
- 2: Letter from Bon Secours (Dec 1988)**
- 3, 10,11,12,13,14: Letters Re Medical records (Nov 1998)**
- 4, 5: Letter from Ann O’Flaherty to Michael’s mother, Patricia (Nov 1998)**
- 6, 7: Notes on Michael’s birth and foster placement**
- 8: Letter from TUSLA adoption services (Feb 2018)**
- 9, 10: Letter from social worker, Child Care Unit (Sept. 1988)**

FILE 2:

Docs:

- 1, 2: Boarding Out Form—2nd Foster Family (name redacted)**
- 3, 4, 5: Boarding Out Contract, Boarding Out Form—McGann Foster Family**
- 6, 7, 8, 9, 10: Correspondence and forms re Boarding Out arrangements (1953)**
- 11: Childrens’ Officer’s Monthly reports (1958-’59)**
- 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17: Letters and forms re school attendance**
- 18: 19, 20: Letters re baptismal records. (1962)**

FILE 3

Docs:

- 1, 2, 3: Letters re baptismal records. (1962)**
- 4, 5, 6: Social worker reports (1959-’62)**
- 7, 8, 9, 10: Notes and letters re special school and school attendance (1962)**

11 - 20: Notes and letters re transfer to 2nd foster family**FILE 4****Docs:**

- 1, 2, 3, 4, 20 & 1(file 5): Social worker report and notes: (1962-'64)**
5 -19: Letters re transfer of Michael to 2nd foster family (1963)

FILE 5**Docs:**

- 1: Continuation of social worker report (1962-'64)**
2, 3, 4: Letter from 2nd foster mother to social worker
5, 6: Social worker report and note (1965-'66)
7, 8: Birth and baptismal certs.
9, 10, 11, 12, 13: Letters and notes re requests for birth cert on joining the army (1972)
14, 15, 16: Letters and notes re request for birth and baptismal cert on Michael’s marriage to Ann (1974)

FILE 6**Docs:**

- 1, 6, 7: Baptismal cert and letter (1990)**
2, 3: Note and redacted letter re Medical records
4, 5: Letter from Fr. Kevin Waldron to Michael (1998)
8, 9: Long birth cert—Michael
10, 11: Long birth cert—Patricia Flaherty (Michael’s mother)
12, 13, 14: Letters re Medical records (2000)
15: Letter from Community Care re schedule of records
16: Schedule of records.

PHOTOGRAPHS

- 1, 2: Michael and Patricia (mother) at their first meeting (Jan,1999)**
3, 4: First letter from Patricia to Michael and Ann
5, 6: Letter from Patricia to Michael and Ann January 1999
7: (top) Michael and Patricia; (bottom) Ann, Patricia, Emer and David (Micheal’s and Ann’s daughter and son)
8: (top) Emer, Patricia, David; (bottom) Michael John (Patricia’s son), Patricia, Michael, Emer, David
9: Michael and Patricia at her birthday party, (March 1999)

- 10: Michael and Patricia during her visit to Ireland (May 1999)**
- 11: Patricia and Michael (June 1999)**
- 12: Ann, Patricia and Michael at Patricia’s home (June 1999)**
- 13: Michael’s passing out parade, Renmore Barracks (2nd left, 2nd row),**
- 14: Front row, Renmore Barracks (2nd from the right),**
- 15: Michael being presented with a 15 year service medal. Cathal Brugha Barracks**
- 16: Michael with the Liam McCarthy Cup**
- 17: Michael on a visit to Áras an Uachtaráin**

MC: It’s the 24th of July 2020. This is Mary Cunningham and I’m speaking with Michael O’Flaherty who is giving an interview in relation to his experiences as a survivor of the Tuam Home. The interview is part of the Tuam Oral History Project being supervised by the History Department in NUI Galway. We are in Flannery’s Hotel in Galway.

Michael, thanks very much for giving your time today. We can start with your early memories, what you have of Tuam, if any, and anything in relation to your fostering experience.

MOF: My very first memory is when I was five and a half. I was put into a car, and as the car moved forward the hedges were going backwards as we went along. It was very dark. We arrived at a house in East Galway. I met Mr. and Mrs. McGann and I was told this is your Mum and Dad. **[See File 2, Docs #3-10]**

My foster mother was a lovely lady and was very kind to me and tried to shield me as best she could from my foster father. He was a very hard man and very fond of using his belt and his hawthorn stick. My foster parents had six children, four girls and two boys. Most of them had left home by the time I arrived. My foster mother was fifty-eight years of age when I arrived with them. I attended the local school, but only on a wet day when no work could be done on the farm. My jobs in the morning were to feed the pigs and milk the cows. The school roll book showed I missed nine days out of twenty. **[see File 2, Docs #12- #17]**

One day, one of the teachers noticed I didn’t have any lunch. The next day when lunchtime came, she brought me to her house for milk and sandwiches. She continued to do this for a few days and then it stopped. My foster father gave me a thrashing for saying I had no lunch. There were times at school when other children taunted me, saying I had no mother or father.

During the summer, when the fair would be on, we had to be up at 4.00 am to bring the cattle to the fair and wouldn’t be back until late at night.

The social welfare lady (Ms. McCormack) would call to see if everything was okay, but I was never there when she called, always in the field working. **[See File 2, Doc #11, File 3, Docs #4,5,6]** One day when I reached fifteen years of age, Ms. McCormack came and seen me in the yard, ‘Michael, you are coming with me. Do you have anything to bring with you?’ I said, ‘Just my hurling stick.’ My foster mother was very upset at me leaving. The reason I was leaving was because once I reached fifteen, I was entitled to be paid

for my labour. My foster mother was prepared to pay the pound, but my foster father wasn't. [See File 4 & File 5 Doc #1]

I was taken to a big dairy farm. Out of the frying pan, into the fire. I never slept in the house. There was a shed out the back with a bed in it. [See File 5 Docs# 5, 6] I never ate at the same table. I was washing milk bottles from six in the morning until late at night. The family always went to the Galway Races and would lock up the house, and I would have to drink milk as there was no food for me. I was paid one pound a week, over the years it was increased to three pounds.

In 1971 the Army came canvassing for recruits and the army band was playing such lovely music. I decided that evening that there had to be a better life than the one I had.

The following year, 1972, I made my way to Renmore Barracks to join the Army. I met a lovely sergeant who welcomed me and gave me a big breakfast. When I had finished the breakfast, he brought me to his office. Unfortunately, the questions he asked, I didn't have the answers for him. He wanted to know my mother's name, my father's name and where I was born. The sergeant said he couldn't take me on that day but to come back in a month's time and he would see what he could do. I returned to the army barracks on the 16th of March 1972 and was accepted as a recruit. It was remarked that they hoped they had a uniform to fit me and the medical officer stated that I was undernourished. [See File 5 Docs#5-13]

Three days after I started an NCO told me at 10.45 that it was pay parade. I could not believe it when I received seventeen pounds for my wages. I also had free clothing, food and a bed. Between March and September in 1972 I had several jobs in the barracks. One Friday in October, Sgt. Flaherty (no relation) told me to be ready on Monday morning, and that myself and two other recruits were going to Dublin (McKee Barracks) to complete a chef's course, for twelve weeks. When the course finished, I returned to Renmore Barracks and started working in the cookhouse, and thoroughly enjoyed it.

While I was in Dublin, I met my wife Ann at a dance, and we continued our friendship. In 1975 we got married and I got a transfer to Collins Barracks in Dublin. I retired from the army in September 1997 after twenty-five years and left with an exemplary reference. The army opened up a new life for me, I was appreciated and made to feel part of a family with plenty of friends. [See Photos #13,14,15]

After I got married and we had our first child I got to thinking about my biological mother. Unfortunately, no matter how hard I tried nobody was able to give me any information about where I came from and where I spent the first five years of my life.

In 1998 the Freedom of Information Act was passed, and we made an appointment with a social worker in Merlin Park Hospital in the month of August. On this day I found out the time I was born, my weight and that I was born in the Tuam Mother and Baby Home. I also met with the parish priest from the area and he said he would do all he could to help me. Over the following four to six weeks the priest and the social worker gathered together information and informed me that my mother lived in Manchester, and if I wrote a

letter to my mother and send it to the social worker, they would send it to my mother. Within two weeks I received a lovely letter from my mother telling me that there was never a day went by that she didn’t think of me. Between December and January there were letters, Christmas cards and a few phone calls. **[See File 1]**

In January we got a letter from her explaining that she wasn’t in the best of health. So, we arranged to travel to Manchester to see her. It was an extremely emotional reunion. Due to her illness we made several visits to her and she managed to come and spend a weekend with me, my wife and children. It was a wonderful time. She also explained what happened in the Home and the way the nuns treated the girls. She returned home to her family home a year after I was born and within one week the parish priest wanted her out of the village because of the shame she had brought on her family and parish. So, she had no choice but to go on the cattle boat to England. She only returned to Ireland three times in her life, to bury her father, her mother, and to visit my house for a weekend. **[See Photos 1-12]**

My mother passed away on the first of October 1999. I only had her in my life for nine to ten months, but it was wonderful to meet her.

MC: Thanks very much Michael for that. You prepared that piece before you met me, and you have read it out. It gives a very good account of your early days where, obviously, you didn’t have a good experience in either of the foster homes, but the army was certainly a good experience for you. Are you happy to leave your story at that now?

MOF: I’m very happy with the story. Thank you for your time in bringing it to light, because if you don’t speak up—I never knew what was wrong with me. I could never mix with people. I was always in fear that I’d get a skelp from someone. In the second home I got an awful going over. I’d get a slap across the head walking out with two buckets of milk. Why do that to flesh and blood. I could go on.

MC: I think you are happy enough with the amount of information you have given for the recording today.

MOF: When you’re thinking about it now, you’re very upset telling the story. How they got away with it. When I left there, a couple of weeks later, the guards were brought in to look for me. I was twenty-four years of age. I could have left that place when I was eighteen, but I didn’t know. I’d talk to people and I’d stop halfway. ‘Why did you stop?’ he said. ‘I’m afraid you’d go back and tell them what I’m after telling you.’ I clammed up. ‘I wouldn’t do that,’ he said.

That was a turning point because I didn’t like what was done to me. I never did anything wrong. I was accused of robbing this and robbing that, because one of the sons was doing the robbing and I was getting the punishment. It was totally wrong. **[See File 5, Docs #2,3,4]**

I rose above it all, I’m glad to be alive to tell the story. I hope people who come after me will see that. When they are going reading it, they should be sure to have a handkerchief with them, because it is a sad story. But if they heard other stories it would be even worse, they’d stop halfway through reading about the way I was treated, blackguarded, you couldn’t get any information from anybody. People would come to the house

where I was reared, ‘Oh, the poor child,’ that’s all you would hear, ‘the poor child, I wonder where his mother is now.’ All this tripe.

I sorted the people out who called me a hypocrite and a bastard, I sorted them out, I rose above it all. I never hit anybody. I’m annoyed with the way people just got away with it. The government knew about it, the social worker knew about it and did nothing about it. These people, first of all, were sending letters to the social worker, I was no good at this, I was no good at that, and I’d be no good to nobody.

I went to the second home, the same procedure- they’d say, ‘The tinkers on the side of the road wouldn’t have you.’ I didn’t know what tinkers meant. ‘You’ll be going to Letterfrack if you don’t do your work.’ [See File 5, Doc #5] That’s all I was getting. I never had a Christmas; I never had a birthday. I didn’t know what a birthday meant. That was it.

I joined the army and that was the best thing I ever did. I had a lot of friends. I met inter-county hurlers there and footballers. They took me under their wing, and I played hurling. I was down in a field one day playing with other lads, and this officer came, and he says, ‘You’re a tidy little hurler.’ So, I got on the army team— at the end of the day you are only as good as your last game, you could go out the next day and you might be brutal. That’s the way it goes. It’s up and down. I appreciated the army for respecting me and taking me on board. I worked with the guards; I had no problem with the guards, they’re doing their job just like the army. [See Photos #16, 17]

I like where I am today, I have my own house, a lovely family, grandkids. They all adore me, and I adore them even more. I never seen myself as a five-year-old playing football or hurling like I have seen my grandson and granddaughters doing it. It brings tears to my eyes. I say to myself when I see them, ‘If my mother could only see us now.’ She would be thrilled. She was delighted to see my son and daughter in Manchester that time. She was a lovely woman, never changed, the same accent and everything. She never changed to the English accent; it was always an Irish accent. [See Photo #7]

I meet people now and I would be talking away with a fella about the GAA and everything and he’d say, ‘What part of Limerick are you from?’ ‘I beg your pardon, I’m not from Limerick.’ ‘You must be some part of it. I can’t figure out the accent, maybe it’s between Dublin and Limerick. It’s more like the west.’ ‘That’s your opinion. Sir, I am from the west, Tuam.’ We’ll leave it at that. I thank you for your time and your hospitality.

MC: Likewise.

MOF: Please God we’ll meet up again. Thank you.