

Transcript of interview with Walter Francis

Interviewer: Mary Cunningham

Date: 23 June 2020

Location: Walter's home in Rathgorgan, Athenry, Co Galway.

Length of Interview: 38 minutes

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

PHOTOS

Photo #1: Winifred (Winnie) Francis, Walter's mother.

Photo #2: Kate Lally, Walter's foster-mother.

Photos #3, #7: Frank Lally, Walter's foster-father.

Photo #4: Patrick (Paddy) Lally, Walter's foster-brother.

Photo #5: Frank Lally, Margaret Lally (foster-sister) and Walter.

Photo #6: Frank Lally, George (son-in-law), Paddy and Walter.

Photo #8: Karen (2nd left) Walter's half-sister.

DOCUMENTS

Doc #1: Letter from TUSLA.

DOC #2: Walter's Birth and Baptismal Certificate.

Doc #3: Marriage Certificate of Winifred Francis and Ernest Kowalski.

MC: It's the 23rd of June 2020. This is Mary Cunningham, and I am interviewing Walter Francis in his home near Athenry, Co. Galway. The interview is part of the Tuam Oral History Project being overseen by the

History Department in NUI Galway. Walter's daughter Marguerite and his son Christopher are present at the interview.

Walter you were born in the Tuam Home. Maybe if you can tell your story in your own way and in your own time.

WF: I was born in Tuam in 1941. I was there about seven to eight years, eight years I think it was. I came to Lallys, foster-parents, Frank Lally was the foster-father and Kate Lally was the foster- mother. They reared me there until, I don't know what year, I was a good age anyway before I left. I worked on the farm, I went to school in Esker, and I worked on the farm there for many, many years, on the land, and I did all of what was to be done on the farm. [See Photos #2, #3, #7]

In 1984 I got married, and I had three children, Marguerite, Christopher and Michael John. I went working with a farmer just when I was gone sixteen. I had to go, until I was sixteen, to school in Esker. That was the rule and regulations that time of the health board. If you were fourteen you had to go two more years with their regulations.

At sixteen I went on the farm, working outside on the farm with other people. I was there for about two years. I went working for the County Council when I was eighteen years of age. I was there for two or three years and went with a firm, driving a grader, they called it, it was for roads and things. I was there for another two years. Then I got a call that Walsh Waste Disposal was looking for drivers. The boss himself came and interviewed me. He came on a Saturday, and I went on a Monday working and I was twenty-five years working with them. When I retired then, I had no place to go only to stay at home. I had the house built at the time when I was working with Walshes. I was thirty-five years in the F.C.A, I retired out of there as well.

The foster parents that I was with looked after me well. I worked hard on the farm, I worked hard on the roads and all them places, but I used to enjoy it. I never looked back.

MC: It was a good experience in the foster home for you?

WF: I had; they were good to me.

MC: Do you remember, anything about the Tuam Home?

WF: No, never remembered. Not even when I came to Lallys, the foster home, do I ever remember coming there.

MC: Did you know, growing up, that you were fostered and had come from the Tuam Home?

WF: It took years, it must have been the best part of—[*extended silence*]

MC: Marguerite do you know?

MF: You did know when you were growing up that you were fostered?

WF: I didn't know for years afterwards.

MF: Oh, did you not?

WF: No, no.

MF: I thought you did.

WF: No, never.

MF: Okay.

WF: I must have been the best part of, let me see, twenty-five years. I never knew.

MF: Really?

WF: No. The only person that knew was a neighbor across the road—Mary Donoghue, when I used to work for them.

MC: You kept your surname Francis and they were Lallys, did you note that when you were older? You had a different name.

WF: I had a different name to their name. I never changed it and they never changed it.

MF: Did you not know, because you had a different name, that you were adopted?

WF: Sure, we were brought up just the same as dummies, in the school and everything. There are survivors that know about when they were there and what they were doing and everything, but I don't ever remember.

The only time I remember was the inspector coming, Miss Murphy we used to call her, and she used to come with the money and clothes for me to Lally's house. She used visit, I think, once a month to see how I was getting on. But the Lallys had to buy the books. The Council or the Health Board never bought anything for me. I still have one leabhar gaeilge, all the time.

MC: The Lallys then had their own children?

WF: Oh, they had. They were gone away except the son, Paddy Lally, and he was on the farm with the father all the time. He never got married. [See photos #4, #5, #6]

MC: Was he much older than you, Walter?

WF: Much older. He was eighty something when he died.

MC: I know from talking to you Walter that you inherited the Lally place.

WF: I did.

MC: Did you inherit from Paddy then?

WF: From Paddy himself. Not from the foster-father.

MC: So, when he passed away you inherited.

WF: We had all that done before he passed away.

MC: So, in general the memories of the home, living with the Lallys are good. School in Esker, how that go for you?

WF: Well, it's hard to describe it because I had so many teachers. I had one, two, three, at least four teachers. That was in the school, not for myself or anything like that, but for everyone; they were coming and going. The permanent teacher was living in the school because there was a building on to the school where he resided, himself and the wife. They had a son and they had a daughter. The daughter was a teacher and the other, I think, was a bank manager in Dublin. We got on well with them. Frank Lally used to buy stock from them, and I used to be delighted because they would come at two o'clock that time and I'd be let out to bring home the calf. We thought it a novelty to get out from school, maybe, two hours beforehand before the school would close.

MC: Was that just you or—?

WF: Only myself. It happened only once a year maybe.

MC: Only once a year. Oh, it wasn't a regular—

WF: No, no. I used to be delighted.

MC: Was your schooling experience and being with people your age, was that all okay for you?

WF: When I went to school, we didn't know each other or anything like that. I used to go down there in the donkey's cart from the top of the hill up there. The Brodericks up here, straight opposite Kilconieron church, had an ass and cart, and they used to go down to the grandfather's place there. The Brodericks used to bring me down in the ass and cart, but when I'd hear the ass and cart coming here at the top of hill, I'd say 'the Wahdwicks are coming,' I wasn't able to pronounce their name right.

MC: Just to finish up on school; you stayed until you were sixteen as you explained.

WF: I had to go until I was sixteen.

MC: Was that in the primary school?

WF: It was, it was a national school. I had to do the Primary that time then at sixteen.

MC: The Primary Certificate exam.

WF: I hadn't it done when I left school at fourteen. I wasn't supposed to leave until I was sixteen. I got a written statement to go there, back for two more years.

MC: Can you remember if they offered you an option of going to, say, a local 'Tech' or anything?

WF: The Health Board asked Frank Lally, would you let him go on the bus, the bus was passing the house to Loughrea to the 'Tech', if I wanted to. 'No, he'll stay here, and he'll stay on the farm.' That's where I had to stay. No other school education, and I didn't get that. I didn't mind, I didn't know at the time.

MC: Would there have been anybody else staying until sixteen in the primary school?

WF: Not in Esker. Some of them left school, they did the Primary at twelve years of age, and they left school after doing the Primary at twelve years of age, but I had to go until I was sixteen.

MC: Can you remember, at the time, did you want to go to Loughrea, or had you thought about it at all?

WF: Never thought about it.

MC: You were happy enough.

WF: Indeed, I was. Never looked back.

MC: Was there a big farm here?

WF: Oh, there was. There was forty-two acres.

MC: So, plenty of work to do.

WF: Down the road there and up to the river. There's a river up there. All here and up to the wall was Lallys. He worked hard and slaved.

MC: Did you have good relationship with your foster mother, Kate Lally? [**See photo #2**]

WF: Oh yeah, I had. I must have been only twenty or twenty-one when she passed away. He had to rear me then after that. He looked after me well, no doubt about it. I worked hard on the farm with them, but it never bothered me.

MC: And you stayed here in the house with him all the time while you were working with the County Council and with Walsh Waste?

WF: I was in Athenry after getting married for a number of years.

MC: We'll move on now to—I think we have a good bit on your childhood. It is good to know that you were happy and content where you were. So, you got married, you were saying. What was the date again?

WF: '84 was it?

MC: At what stage were you aware of your mother or your birth mother, that you had never met her?

WF: I never knew anything about it until Susan, the Lord have mercy on her; we went to Esker sports, down the road here. The Walshes were there at the time, I didn't know much about the Walshes at the time. We came home after the sports and Susan said to me, 'Did you know that yank that was there with the Walshes?' I said, 'What yank?' 'There was a yank there,' she said, 'did you know who she was?' I said, 'No.' 'Do you know now,' she said, 'I could be wrong, I could be right, that could be your mother.' Now, I didn't know anything, how could she think that was my mother. 'Don't be coddin,' I said, 'that couldn't be.' [See photo #1]

Down through the years then when I went, it must be ten years afterwards, when I went doing the researching about my own mother. A friend of mine did a lot of researching, a second person did a lot of

researching for me. I carried on with the researching and they did a lot themselves. Then I found out where the Francises were living.

MC: When Susan said that to you, your wife Susan said, you must have known, you knew at that stage that your birth mother was somewhere?

WF: Yes.

MC: So, at some point when you were an adult—

WF: It must have been three or four years afterwards when I went to do any researching, or where would I go. To get my birth certificate, I wrote to the Health Board in Galway. I wrote to Cork and Dublin. There was no certificate whatsoever of me; where I was born. This man I met in Galway, we were talking, I was working for Walsh Waste at the time, and he said to me, ‘Did you ever try Tuam?’ I said to him, ‘What in the name of God would bring me down to Tuam? There was a hospital in Galway.’ He said, ‘There’s a Home there for people.’ I went and followed that, and I went down to Tuam and I went to the Presbytery, because I had to get a baptism and birth certificate for getting married.

MC: So that’s the reason you were looking, it was because you had to have it for getting married.

WF: I went down there. The priest wasn’t there, and he came in about five minutes. He said, ‘You were looking for me.’ I said I was, and I was looking for my own birth certificate, ‘Would you have it here?’ He looked up the books, and it was there. I didn’t know at the time who my mother was. He said, ‘I put your mother’s name on the certificate, it’s still there. I don’t want you ever to reveal it to anyone whatsoever or I’ll be sacked.’ This is before the information was given out in the years afterwards. He said, ‘I’ll get sacked by the Bishop of Tuam here.’ I made a promise and I said I wouldn’t, and I never did. That’s how I followed it up then when I got my mother’s name on the certificate.

MC: Was that a baptismal cert you got?

WF: Yes.

MC: So, that was your first knowledge of who your mother was. Following that then, you said you went looking for your mother. At what stage, do you know, that you thought you wanted to look for her?

WF: I was what—I must have been at least thirty or thirty-five years of age. Because myself and Susan, the Lord have mercy on her, we went in to where we found out where the Francises were living. We looked up other relatives in Ballinfoyle. But there was no one at the house the day we called. I called a second time and we got no answer. Then we went to TUSLA. Who was before TUSLA?

MC: The Child Protection Agency. I’m not sure what the name was.

WF: I went into Galway, and I went to Merlin Park, where I was told to go. TUSLA has an office there now in Merlin Park. They went under a different name at the time. It was they who made arrangements, and they who told me all about the Francises. It was Anne or Mary Francis we met first. That lady brought us to the house, not far from the homeplace where my mother was born. We had a great evening there; first time ever.

MC: Anne Francis, would she have been your cousin then, was it a niece of your mother that you met?

WF: Yes.

MC: Were they aware of your existence before that time, do you know?

WF: No, they didn't know that time. Jimmy Francis, my uncle, that brought my mother down (*to Tuam*) to have me that time in 1941. I didn't know anything. We were just left there.

MC: Did you meet your mother's brothers or sisters, that family, that generation?

WF: Oh, we did afterwards.

MC: Jimmy Francis was alive that time?

WF: He was. I remember Jimmy Francis coming to Walshes, because they were great friends. It started off because Mary Walsh was doing a nursing course in the Regional Hospital, and she used to stay in Francis street where the house is there all the time. That's how they made friends with the mother and I used to meet Jimmy in the garage and everything. Jimmy didn't know who I was, I didn't know who he was. Now, whether he did or not I don't know, he never pretended nothing.

MC: He possibly didn't either, apart from the fact that ye had the same surname, which would be the only—

WF: Well, I had a feeling he had, I could be wrong.

MC: Anyway, you made contact then with the cousins.

WF: We met the whole troop.

MC: Just to get back to when Susan said she saw, or she thought she saw, your mother at the event in Athenry.

WF: She could see the image of me in her.

MC: Did you ever find that your mother did come there for sure?

WF: She did.

MC: She did? She was visiting at that stage.

WF: The Walshes, who I worked for, told me afterwards, maybe a good few years afterwards, they told me who she was.

MC: If she was visiting, she might have met with the Walshes, because Jimmy your uncle knew the Walshes well and they were friends.

WF: They were, they were great buddies. Remember, the two Francis girls used to be back there, we'll call it Robert Hartes, no relation or anything like that only terribly great friends, and I used to play with them hide and seek in the trees. Little did I know I'd meet them again.

MC: It's amazing, it really is amazing.

We'll move on then to how you found that you had somebody else, that you had a sister. I know from a conversation with you before Walter, that you found you had a blood relative. How did that come about?

WF: Yes, we got a letter was it?

Marguerite F: That would have come about from his half-sister, Karen, doing her research. How that came about was she was big into genealogy at the time. She was, obviously, looking for her own parents, because she was adopted over in America, by Winnie. She would have been born in America, put up for adoption over there. Then, as she got older, she got curious about her own family, got into genealogy, and she ended up finally finding her own birth cert. It was quite hard to find at the time, she said, because over in the US they weren't available to get very easily. She eventually found her own birth cert, that eventually led to—she found then that her mother had passed, and that she was buried in America. She went to the grave, she was able to find where the grave was, and on the grave, it had said that she had three other children.

From the names Ernie, Margie and Mary, she looked them up. She was able to find out where they lived, and she actually just arrived at their door one day to try and see if they would be able to have a meeting with her and explain who she was. It was over there when she met the three siblings. They had been contacted and told, not long before that, that they had a half-brother Walter over here in Ireland. Anne Francis, at the time, would have been in contact with the other three siblings in America. When TUSLA found the Francis family here and made contact with Dad, then Anne made contact with the other three siblings over in America to explain that they had half-brother over here in Ireland. It was at the meeting that Karen had in their house, to meet them for the first time, that they then explained about Dad, and that's how Karen would have found out about Dad originally. In that same meeting they gave Karen Dad's name and address, but also gave a name and number for Anne Francis. That's when Karen made contact with Anne, and Anne was able to explain everything she knew. **[See photo #8]**

MC: It's quite a confusing story.

MF: It's a little bit, and it all kind of happened very quickly too. Dad discovered that he had the Francis family in 2016, and shortly after that we would have found out about Karen. So, it all happened very quickly, the two of them.

WF: Within two or three months.

MF: Within a few months, yeah.

MC: I'll have to get you to backtrack Marguerite.

Recording paused.

MC: The recording was stopped to get clarification on Marguerite's account of Karen. She clarified that Winifred gave birth to Karen after going to the states, which was a number of years after Walter had been born here, that she gave up Karen for adoption, that Karen then looked for her, at which point Winifred had

passed away. Karen had established that she had three half siblings in the states and that she had also found then that Walter existed here in Ireland.

All of this was found around 2016. Walter, you established contact with the Francis family who are living in the county still and then Karen, through a DNA search, was that right? She established that she had relatives in Ireland. Did you meet with Karen?

WF: Yeah, she came from America, I met her at Shannon Airport, Ian and Marguerite and myself. And you know, the emotion, I couldn't believe it, after seventy-seven years.

MF: After Karen had been told about Dad here in Ireland, she made contact first of all with Dad's cousin Anne Francis, and after that she then made contact with me through Anne. Through e-mails and messages and phone calls she asked would she be able to ask for a DNA blood test between Karen and Dad just to confirm— She sent the kit over; he did the DNA test and a couple of weeks later it confirmed that they were related. Then, she very quickly got on the internet and started booking to come over. It was only a few weeks after that, I think it was around February we had the confirmation from the DNA test and she was home in May or June, I think, shortly after that.

MC: So, it was the end of a long journey for her.

MF: Absolutely. We had already gone through the excitement and the emotions of finding the Francis family, whereas this was her—she kind of got everybody together. We, first of all, were told about the relations in, I suppose in Ireland first, the cousins, and then that Dad had three other half siblings over in America, and then we found out about Karen, whereas Karen kind of found out about everything together. It would have been a bigger emotion for her.

MC: It was emotional certainly for you Walter.

I know you are involved in the organization, the Support Network for the Tuam Home. I know from seeing you tending the area where they believe that some children are buried, that you have a strong emotional connection with the place now.

WF: When a woman went to give birth and waited there for nine months, it was an awful thing to be told after a year in the home, slaving there for the nuns, and be out the door and the door closed behind your back, it's an awful cross to carry.

MC: Yes, that people were separated from their children.

WF: How many doors were closed against other people, other survivors in other homes as well? I know there were good nuns, good doctors, good guards, and vice a versa, the other way around, they were there too.

MC: Do you find, having joined the network, do you find that it's a good support for yourself, or sharing your story with other people?

WF: Yes, we're trying now to get the government to in contact with us. The leader of the country and the President, not alone to meet us, but to see us there at the grave. Now he was never there (*the President*), the

Taoiseach was there, behind our backs. We didn't know at the time that he called to see it. The only lady who came two or three times afterwards was Katherine Zappone, the Minister for Children. I give credit to her; she came three or four times after meeting us.

Catherine Corless who was the leader of the group at the time, but wasn't a survivor or anything like that, but started all the work, the hard work to get those certificates (*death certificates of children who died in the Home*) and everything.

We don't associate much with them anymore because they don't associate with us. We had our own group, and this day, we went to a meeting in Tuam and were told, 'Anyone in the group who would not belong to the group must leave now.' That was our chairman, he's the ex-chairman now. Myself and P.J Haverty left. After that whatever meeting they had together, they formed up a new group and we got a new chairman, and he looks after us. Maybe once or twice a month, he rings us up and says how are we getting on and tells us any information. We keep contact with one and other. Catherine Corless worked hard, and I mean worked hard, because she did a lot of work to get all those certificates up.

I'm after discovering that there's another grave, not far from Tuam, and we think that there could be babies there in this little grave in Tuam. Myself and P.J are going to do a little research to see who is buried there. It could happen that those babies who were in Tuam could be buried in this grave.

MC: This is a grave separate from the site that ye know about already?

MF: There's nothing proven about that though yet, nothing factual to go by.

WF: This man knows it's there—

MC: There's a lot to investigate yet and, I suppose, it's unfortunate that the report from the Commission is not coming out now. (*Publication of the report from The Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation was due in June but was postponed*)

WF: It's unfortunate for those women who went through life, moved around until they came to Tuam, and slaved and slaved, the same as those in the Magdalene Laundry. We were in there, and it would put the fear of God in you to see what did go on, and what was there when we went in. Now, it's all changed because a new contractor has built it up from the foundations. When we were in it, the first time, we saw where the mothers would be and where the children would be in the rooms, tiny little room, about that size there out in the back kitchen. Now, if you saw where the nuns were living, the golden taps, golden everything, everything was spot on. How there was a difference between families and between babies and children and the women. It was something out of this world.

MC: When did you visit there?

WF: Two years ago.

MC: Before it was taken over.

Well, I think we have covered most of the story.

WF: I hope so.

MC: There was a lot of twists and turns in finding out where you were from.

Thanks very much for giving me your time, and Marguerite as well.

WF: You're welcome

MF: You are very welcome

You have a good few documents which clarify the story. Thanks very much.

MF: Thank you.

Walter is very good friends with another survivor P.J. Haverty. On the 16th of September 2019, I recorded them telling the story of how they met.

MC: Tell us how you met P.J.

WF: P. J was in front of me in the barbers. I don't know was I next or collecting a paper or something.

PJH: You were sweeping the floor.

WF: Oh, sweeping the floor. That's right.

PJH: And I was sitting getting my hair cut.

WF: I said to him 'Who are you?' 'P.J. Haverty.' 'Where do you come from now?' 'Moylough'. And then—

PJH: You sat down and started reading the paper.

WF: Yeah.

PJH: You actually came in and started sweeping the floor, and I didn't know it was your daughter that was cutting my hair at the time. I said, 'I'm going to try that the next day, and I'll get a free haircut'. And she said 'That's my father. He has nothing else for doing'. So, he swept the floor, sat down, read the paper, and Catherine Corless was in it about Tuam.

'And to think that I was born there in 1941'. I turned around and said, 'What did you say there?' He said, 'I was born there in 1941.' I said, 'I was born there in 1951.' And you said, 'Go away out of that.' And then he came up and shook my hand. And that's how we got to—

W.F: We stayed together then.

PJH: Isn't that amazing? How he just walked in—

WF: All it took was a hair trim.

MC: And did ye start to come to meetings then at that stage? Or had ye been before?

PJH: We had no group at the time. There was a group formed later on, so we started going to all the meetings.

MC: Ok. Very good.

PJH: That was something out of the blue. Amazing.

MC: It was. It was good.

PJH: So, we didn't fight yet anyway.

WF: No. No and we won't either.

MC: Ye don't look like you would fight.

PJH: It was fantastic.