

Jeannie O’Gorman

Narrator

Cole Steinberg

Interviewer

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Transcriber

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Minnesota

CS: Cole Steinberg

JO: Jeannie O’Gorman

CS: This is an interview conducted as part of a larger faculty and student research project initiated by Dr. Julie Luker of Concordia University, Saint Paul. Today is June 10th, 2022, and I am here with Jeannie O’Gorman. My name is Cole Steinberg, and I am an undergraduate student at Concordia University, Saint Paul. Today I will be talking to Jeannie about what life was like growing up in the Twin Cities.

During this interview I’m going to ask you to reflect on your childhood life experiences as they relate to a variety of social topics from that time period.

For the purposes of this interview we have defined childhood as birth through 17 years of age.

To begin, please state and spell your full name, including a maiden name if applicable.

JO: My name is Jeanne Kathleen O’Gorman J-E-A-N-N-E K-A-T-H-L-E-E-N O’G-O-R-M-A-N and the story is that I was born Gorman and I changed it to O’Gorman later in life.

CS: Okay. Please identify your race and gender.

JO: Caucasian Female.

CS: Please state your date of birth.

JO: October 27th, 1946.

CS: Finally, please state where you grew up, such as the name of the neighborhood or a nearby intersection including any major moves you made during this time period.

JO: I was six months old when my family moved to 927 Edmund Avenue, which was Edmund and Milton in the Midway and sometimes referred to as Frog Town area Saint Paul. I lived there until I was 13 years old. In 1959 my parents moved to Watson. Which was Watson and

Syndicate, over by Cretin High School in Saint Paul. But most of my childhood was spent on Edmund.

CS: Okay, thank you. I would like to learn more about your family life. Let's begin with the memories you have for immediate and extended family. Please share some memories that you have about these relationships.

JO: Some memories about my family? First I'll let you know that my father, Walter, is Irish and Scottish and my mother, Alice, was Italian. My family was Catholic and there were four children in our family. Gary, the oldest, who's five years older than I am. Mary, who's exactly two years older than I, we share a birthday. Sheila who was four and a half years younger than I am. So it was a family of six living in Saint Paul on Edmund Avenue. My father had various jobs, primarily as a house painter and related fields. In the 50s, my mother worked out of the home as a federal employee typist, on and off. Between having four kids and so it was a working-class family. I would say, lower middle-class family, there was a strong influence of my mother's Italian ancestors who moved closer to Montgomery Ward's. Closer to Edmund at 1474 Edmund, which is on a line where Montgomery Ward's, Midway shopping district was. And extended family of aunts and uncles and cousins. So, growing up I had more of a sense of being Italian than I do presently. There was lots of extended family influences, family background was traditional Catholic, and, in those days, there were nationality churches, we lived closer to Saint Agnes church, but we lived 7 blocks from Saint Agnes and 9 blocks from Saint Columba, but we went to Saint Columba because my father was Irish and Saint Agnes was a German Catholic Parish. To the extent that even the church bulletin was in German. You had to be German, or it was preferred that you'd be German to attend there. So we were that flavor of Catholics that were going to, Irish Catholics at Columba. I went there for grade school as well. I think the strongest influences as a child were religion and nationality. And as an example, there was a windstorm, or tornado, I think it was. Sheer winds that went through Saint Paul in 1951, my little sister was like a newborn, and we'd gone to my grandmother's house to just congregate, because that's what you did rather than going to your own basement, you went to family. When we got back, the spot where my father's car would have been, a tree had fallen. I remember how exciting it was to be safe in the family there together. So, we went upstairs and all the power was out at that point, and my little sister was a newborn, was in the middle of my parent's bed. We were in my parent's bedroom, and we all said the Rosary and I felt unafraid of the storm, because, one, when we were together as a family, and two, God was on our side. So, I think, I would add a third element, there's nationality, there was religion, and then there was the limited economic resources, which are kind of a constant strain. Most of my parents' arguments were about, you know, where the next dollar was going to come from and whether we'll be able to not have to go on relief. I think is what it was called, which meant welfare.

CS: Okay. Did you have any family pets? If so, please describe them.

JO: Oh, no. We had no family pets. That was certainly an extravagance, but regardless of that I would tend to bring home animals and put them in the basement and my mother would remove them. When I was, let me think, when I was twelve years old, my brother had somehow managed to talk my mother into letting him raise pigeons in the space where our garage had been. That garage had fallen apart and burnt down into this empty lot where the garage had been. My brother miraculously convinced my mother that he was able to raise pigeons, which he successfully did and continued to do for the next 60 years. Not in my parent's home, he left

eventually, but so, my brother got to have pigeons but there were no other family pets. It was just something I wished for.

CS: How were household chores divided between members of your family?

JO: By gender. I mean, the 50s was very clear cut in gender roles, there was no ambiguity and my brother mowed the lawn and did other things like that, and everything else fell to the girls and that held until my brother left for the service, and then liberation meant that the girls got to do things like mow the lawn. It was strictly traditional gender-based chores, fairly evenly distributed. My mother was a perfectionist so there was high standards for how things should be done.

CS: Thank you. Next, please describe the ways in which your family's economic status influenced your childhood.

JO: I remember as a kid, praying for \$100 because I figured that was a big enough sum to pay off the federal debt and give my parents enough money. I think that money was a constant anxiety. I know that it was a constant anxiety. There were certain saints in the neighborhood, like Miss Johnson, a Jewish woman whose grocery store was a block away, who allowed neighbors, and all customers to buy on credit. I think that people like that were saviors in saving lots of hunger from happening in that neighborhood. Clothes were a matter of hand-me-downs and homemade garments. I was taller than my older sister so sometimes I got to leapfrog ahead and get something before my older sister did. Remaking clothes from the 30s, you know, communion dresses were cut down, prom dresses from the 30s. So, it was a constant reality, and every one of us kids knew about it.

CS: Okay. Great, now I would like to know more about your experiences with religion, such as Catholicism, Lutheranism, etc. Describe what you can recall about your family's religious practices when you were growing up.

JO: Well, religious segregation was sort of like Belfast, Ireland without the guns. There was definitely us and them. I remember secretly baptizing the Lutheran girl next door because I didn't want her to go to hell. Which I had every reason to believe from my parochial school teaching, that she would, and I knew that I would get in trouble if either parents knew that I was doing that. So, I secretly baptized her, and I think Catholicism was as much of reality, pervasive reality in my childhood as, boiled potatoes. It was just constantly there. Whether it was religious dogma, whether it was the nuns, whether it was how you treated each other, whether it was ethics, or whether it was us and them. Catholics were not allowed to participate in public school playground activities. I was told, such as baton twirling, cause they wouldn't take Catholic girls to teach baton at Hamline playground or Minnehaha playground, which I think was city run. Whether that was factual or mythic, I don't know but that's what we were led to believe. I have a sense to believe that it was probably true. The baton teacher had the authority to discriminate in that regard. It was highly verboten to enter Protestant churches, and not only were you supposed to stay in Catholic churches, but only under special circumstances did you go outside your nationality church. So, Saint Agnes was kind of exotic. Even though it was Catholic.

CS: Okay. Now I would like to learn more about the neighborhood in which you grew up. If you moved during childhood, you may wish to reflect on more than one neighborhood. This is fine to

do, but please indicate as you do it. Please describe what comes to mind when thinking about the neighborhood in which you grew up.

JO: I'll stick with Edmund. If you ever watch All in the Family reruns there's some opening scenes that scan, I think it's the Bronx, all the wood frame, working class houses, and that to me looks like the street that I grew up in. You know, row on row of framed houses, look like variations on the same model. Some stucco, some wood, some...what was called depression brick, which was kind of a tar-paper exterior. Most of them were built in the 1930's to World War I era, with some signs of quality like stained glass windows and beam ceilings but had over the years just gotten down, sort of a tired look. When I drive through that neighborhood now, what I notice is the absence of children outside playing. On any given block, I'm just guessing if you were to drive down the street you would probably see 12 to 15 kids out on the street playing or in the lots or in the yard and on any given block. I made that number up but I mean, it's just there was a high visibility of kids because we weren't inside. Most didn't have TVs for a large part of the 50's. And it was the child culture norm to be outside if the weather didn't keep you inside. There were corner grocery stores, which were every other block, just about as frequent as mailboxes. If you remember what mailboxes look like. There were periodically noises like the milk man coming. There was the ice man, for some people who still had ice boxes. Which was coming to be quaint. I think about once a month we were treated in seeing the rag man come down the alley in a horse drawn wagon. I think he had a Belgian horse and because he was used to 12 or 15 kids on the block, he didn't make any issue of kids hanging in the back. That was our version of a horseback ride...pony rides. And because we did not have a sense of what was appropriate or not appropriate, as far as anti-Semitic terms, we called him the shimmy man, and I was, as a kid, under the impression that that meant that that was a job description. In your head you had no sense of what that word meant, except it meant a man who went through the alley with a horse-drawn cart and picked up junk. That was recycling. We also had a rare event in our neighborhood, I always wanted to compare notes with other people who grew up in the Midwest area, if they had the same thing. On our block, we had a bakery, and the bakery had a basement in which they were wedding receptions held, and had a nice little, long lot in a grotto and some people could bring their wedding party out into the grassy backyard and get a wedding reception on the cheap. As kids, what we did was we had what was called Shivaree, which I looked up, is a European wedding tradition. In a Shivaree, in the old world we were invited to bother the newlyweds and make so much noise that you will be called inside and give treats and in the 1950's rendition of the Shivaree we'd go around and collect rocks in a team and put them in the garbage cans and smash down to make noise makers and rake them against the sidewalk fences until the wedding party came out and threw pennies at us and we call that a Shivaree. I have no idea what caused that to happen in our neighborhood and not in others. There would be jump ropes and jump rope songs that were part of kid culture and I have no idea how these jump rope songs would make it across the country, and I think it would be interesting to know. You know? Like if there are other people in other parts of the country who'd sing "Sailor, sailor, do your duty, long came Judy the bathing beauty, she wiggled and she wiggled and she did the splits, she wore her dresses above her slips", you know, and then jumped fast until she landed on the letter of the boyfriend she was going to have. You know, things like that. There'd be softball in the vacant lots, there would be roller skating, there would be bicycling, all kinds of things with bicycles. People rigging up their bikes. We had play theaters and garage musicals. Playgrounds were widely in use and always full of kids. The merry-go-rounds, the teeter totters, and the

swings because lawsuits I don't think had yet been invented so kids were able to play these kinds of activities, so it was aerobic being a kid back then.

CS: Great. Next, I would like to learn more about the values shared by your family and your neighbors. Values are principles or standards that help guide behavior. What memories come to mind that demonstrate what these values were for your family and your neighbors?

JO: Children are to be seen and not heard. A child's opinion is not important, the father is the head of the family. If you hurt yourself, don't cry. Boys who cry are endangered, an endangered species. Physical punishment is acceptable. Kids are property belonging to the parents, girls matter less than boys. The president is always right. American right or wrong. Do not question authority. If you're called to go to school for behavior, it's your fault before there's even been a trial. You shouldn't question anything about what the church says. Do as I say, not as I do. Those are some wonderful standards that the 50's are famous for in the neighborhood I grew up in.

CS: Can you share a memory where growing up, you behaved in a way that reflected one of your values?

JO: Yes. I would say that children are powerless, is one of the other values. There was a woman who was a single parent and she had three little children. I would say that they were five, three, and two years old, and she lived across the street from us. Maybe she was an alcoholic too, in retrospect. But she would leave the kids alone behind the screen door and we'd be playing in the street in summertime and see these three little kids who are what you would call neglected and endangered. One of the little girls had ringworm so she was also scapegoating. So, there's these three unprotected, endangered, abused probably, emotionally abused, possibly more, kids and no one said anything. I remember feeling helpless that there was really nothing that would be said, or could be said, or should be said on their behalf. So, I was probably eight years old, but I knew that I was somehow complying with the powers that be, against my own integrity at that time as a third grader.

CS: Okay, wow. Now I'm going to ask you all about leisure time. Describe some of the ways in which you, your family, and your neighbors engaged in leisure time when you were growing up. I know you covered some of this already when talking about the neighborhood but if anything else comes to mind, feel free to share it.

JO: Vacations were expensive and so going swimming was affordable. My parents would have friends over for cards. That was affordable. Mostly it was a contingency of what or what was not affordable. I don't have a lot to say about that. Picnics at Como Park, that was affordable. Sometimes going on rides in Como, one ride because that was affordable. Or one nickel cone at Dairy Queen was affordable. So, things were in a sense contained within the neighborhood doing things with family or a few family friends. Definitely mostly things related to Saint Paul. Church activities like ice cream socials, church fairs, that sort of thing. The state fair was too expensive, so we didn't go there, and so I didn't go out of state for a vacation, discounting Wisconsin, Taylor's falls, until I was 14. So, there was, I think, the economic situation dictated your life.

CS: What types of toys did you play with growing up?

JO: My brother's, unfortunately. I think even though he doesn't have much of a memory of his childhood, he probably remembers his sisters messing up his stuff.

Kinds of toys...Bicycle, roller skates, dolls. My friend who lived a block away was spoiled, and that meant she had toys that she asked for and got for Christmas. So, we spent a lot of time over there. Parchisi, Chinese checkers, all the different kinds of dramatic play things like typewriters and things like that. Easy Bake Oven, probably hazardous to skin health. One time we wanted to do a ballet. So we went door to door collecting money, allegedly for the Hungarian relief fund. Hungary was going through a revolution, and we thought that we could get money, my girlfriend and I, so we went door to door pretending to collect for them and we turned the money over to her somewhat larcenous aunt who bought us Tutus. So, there was some crime in my childhood too. That I'm fessing up to now that the statute of limitations is up on that. Those kinds of things. Simple, inexpensive, and immediately available activities like that. [indecipherable].

CS: As an adult, have you kept in touch with any friends from your childhood?

JO: Yes, my friend who helped me steal money from the neighbors for the Hungarian relief fund and is still my friend. We were introduced to each other when she was five, and I was six. We are still friends, I got to do things with her that expanded my circle and her family was more of a family of choice for me as a kid.

CS: Okay. That would lend credibility to the term "thick as thieves".

JO: Right. I was always afraid she would narc on me, so I had to keep her close.

CS: Next, let's discuss your experience with schooling. Please describe what it was like going to school as a child.

JO: Repressive. It was a parochial school we went to, K through eight at St. Columba Catholic school and it was run by the St. Joseph nuns. You were luck if you got a nice teacher, which most of them were. But if you were dealt an unfortunate one then you were stuck and it was torture. I think that in eight years of school at St. Columba's, because I had gone to a different kindergarten. I only had one who was really unfortunate and that was my sixth grade one. I think the curriculum was decent, I have a really good vocabulary and sense of English and math from back then. I want to make a footnote, when you're talking about education, because my career was teaching, and that is that if you had any kind of special needs you're out of luck as far as school was concerned. There was a down syndrome man in my grade school who was probably high functioning for his diagnosis but a couple of years behind academically with his peers. His parents kept him at grade school [indecipherable], and he was an exception because two doors down from us was a family with a kid who had autism spectrum disorder. There was no schooling for him, kids like that were left at home. His sister, who was a friend of mine, childhood friend of mine, was mildly developmentally delayed and was able just by a fluke, to be able to attend Christ Child's school. Which was for exceptional kids and other ones, if you had money, in other words, and you had a special needs kid there's some programs if your kid was well enough, behaviorally, and otherwise, where you could find a program but otherwise the kids were on their own. When this brother and my friend, the autistic one, was 13, he was taken to a state hospital, and as a special ed. Teacher, I later visited that hospital in the mid 60's. I visited it maybe five or six years after he had been sent there and it was a snake pit. There was a gymnasium with about 20 profoundly disabled individuals, probably 12 and under, one attendant who was playing basketball by himself while the attendees were wreaking and rocking and it was one of the most horrific sights of my professional career. So, when you talking about schooling, you're not going to see an integrated [school system], you will see a segregated school system,

that by de-facto, partly because if you're black you went to the black Catholic school. You'd see segregated and you would see no special kids at all. But you would be aware that they were there but they weren't entitled to schooling.

CS: Okay. That is a good Segway to the last portion here. For our final topic I am going to ask you to reflect on local and global issues such as war, poverty, discrimination, social unrest, etc. In your opinion, what were some of the biggest local or global issues affecting the people in your neighborhood when you were growing up?

JO: I wasn't aware of global issues, except that Eisenhower was president growing up. I think in retrospect, I think the issues that I was aware of was like I mentioned, that autistic kid next door, the neglected kids across the street, the physical abuse of which was common. It was really daily, I mean I wouldn't say daily, it was something that you are constantly aware of. You see kids slapped, you'd see kids with strap marks on their backs and sometimes on their legs. Especially when you notice it and you knew that kids were fourth class, at best, citizens. That women deserved what they got from their husbands if they were beat. So, I think that in our family, there was domestic abuse and there was physical abuse of kids. I was aware of sexual abuse in the neighborhood that women detected a notorious pedophile who nobody did anything about. So, I'm thinking of just the social injustices that were prevalent. I wasn't aware enough of the racial situation in Jason, Selby Dale area, but you know, that would be more something that I would be in touch with in high school, but not in that particular chapter of my life.

CS: Did your family or your neighborhood have a bomb or fallout shelter in case of a nuclear war?

JO: No, that would be totally extravagant. Why waste the bricks on that when you can build a barbeque?

CS: In your opinion, what are some of the biggest local or global issues affecting the people in your childhood neighborhood today?

JO: I forgot to mention, as far as global issues, was the Korean War, we had to go under our desk and protect the back of our neck from nuclear fallout. This was going to save my spinal cord [sarcasm]. Tell me your question again.

CS: It was, in your opinion, what are some of the biggest local or global issues affecting the people in your childhood neighborhood today?

JO: I believe, drugs, I think it's largely a drug neighborhood with lots of... it's like the social problems of my childhood are on steroids and they are behind closed doors. The domestic abuse is still there only it's behind closed doors, that child abuse is still there but maybe those children are selling drugs rather than being beaten up by their stepfathers. I don't know. The racism is still there but black lives may or may not matter in that neighborhood, you know as it stands now it's a largely depressed neighborhood with some gentrification but not enough to make it ache for me to look at.

CS: Okay. Now, backtracking just a little bit. How safe or unsafe did you feel in light of these issues?

JO: I felt safe on the street walking, playing outside, crossing streets, going into other neighborhoods. I did not feel safe in the presence of an angry teacher. I felt safe from being

abducted. I did not feel safe if my father was upset at something I did. So, this safety was more determined by the adults in my intimate space, rather than fear of strangers.

CS: Okay. I think that's about all. I'll just read this last part. This is the end of our interview; your responses are invaluable and we really appreciate that you took the time to do this today. Thank you so much for participating.