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Interview with Mr. Michael Vahey, Irish immigrant, at his home in Greenville, Delaware, April 27, 1972, by Michael Fahey.

- Q This is an interview with Mr. Michael Vahey done by Michael Fahey at his home in Greenville, Delaware on April 27, 1972 and it was done for the University of Delaware. All right, I'm going to ask you to begin with, Mr. Vahey, where you were born in Ireland.
- A Well, I was born in the west of Ireland, County Mayo it was, place called [sounds like Enille], County Mayo.
- Q How large a place was that?
- A Well, it was not really a large place. It was about 500 people, kind of a country village.
- Q How large a family were you from?
- A Well, a pretty large family, there was five girls and five boys, and I was the oldest of the five boys.
- Q What did your parents do?
- A Well, my parents were farmers, lived on a farm.
- Q Was it a hard life, everyone worked?
- A Well it was a life--it was fairly hard work, I mean you worked early in the morning and late at night--I mean you didn't work an eight-hour day like we do here. We got up in the morning at six or seven and had to milk the cows and do your morning chores and then evening it was 9:00 before you got done.
- Q What did you farm, mainly.
- A Well, of course you farmed, of course, wheat and oats and barley, rye, potatoes, turnips and beets, and that was about it, I guess. Of course we had sheep and cattle.
- Q You came over here in 1929 also?
- A That's right, yeah.
- Q Were things getting harder, then, 'cause that was the year of the Depression.
- A Well, no things over there were more or less the same as they were before, and maybe a few years after, it was just that the family--the older girls moved out and they worked in different places and they made [inaudible] a week, in different cities. And I was the oldest boy and I was close to returning and my father promised me he would leave me the farm if I'd come back in so many years, which I intended to do at that time. But after being in this country for a few years, I mean I didn't feel like going back to the farm again.

- Q Tell me, do you remember, this is sort of off the track a little bit, but do you remember, was farming and things disrupted by the civil war, can you remember that?
- A Well, during the civil war we was in the Black and Tans and the [inaudible], well, very much so, I was then about 12 years of age and my father and other men in the village hadn't been able or wouldn't go on the highways because the British troops or the Black and Tans as they were called were patrolling back and forth and at times it wasn't safe to be there if you were a young man because they were always after what they called the I.R.A. and sometimes they were drunk and they would fire in something they see--sheep, cattle, cows and everything else in the field.
- Q The Black and Tan were not particular about who they shot.
- A Well, the Black and Tans were really not part--they were called the British Army but they were not trained in the regular British Army or as we always thought then and I still do, they were people who were in jail in Britain were turned loose to go over and try to keep the Irish Rebellion down, which was not successful and eventually got the Irish Free State. The British drew all their troops out, Black and Tans and all.
- Q So when did you start thinking seriously about leaving Ireland and coming to America?
- A Well, I don't know exactly when the date was. I mean, I figured that I would like to go to the United States because things in Ireland got in a turmoil, with the British government and the British troops, you know, I figured I would like to go to the United States.
- Q Had you been in touch with--I mean, had you heard or had you been in touch with anyone?
- A Well, yes, we always had people from the neighborhood who worked in this country five or ten years, come home and they would visit and then they'd go back. You'd hear about the United States, and well it was a better place to make a living.
- Q That was the general opinion, that it would be easier here.
- A That was the general opinion because under the British rule, there was no place much for you to go. So I figured the United States was a good place to go to make a living.
- Q All right. How would you hear about the United States?
- A Well, you'd hear from the people who were there for several years and come back and pay a visit and some stayed and bought a farm and lived there, more people came just for a visit and went back again. They didn't all stay home, see. The Yankees would be coming, and they don't stay; they come maybe for three months and then they would return back to the United States again. But then that's when we heard about the United States. A lot of people in my place went to New Zealand and Canada.

Q So where did you go to first in the United States?

A Well, I first come here to Wilmington.

Q Oh, directly to Wilmington.

A Directly to Wilmington, but I mean, my passage was paid by my sister to go to Los Angeles where I had aunts and uncles.

Q Oh, was she over here?

A She was over here a few years--well, about five years ahead of me. So I come here to Wilmington and then of course I met several cousins, you know, and I decided to stay here. I also had uncles and aunts in Minnesota.

Q Why Wilmington if you were going to Los Angeles? Were you gonna visit the cousins, or what?

A Well, I was supposed to go there, really, but after I come here to Wilmington I just decided to stay here.

Q But I mean, you came here to visit cousins?

A Well, I come here to visit my sister first who was living here. And then I have a sister in Pittsburgh and I had cousins and aunts and uncles out on the West Coast.

Q What was your sister doing?

A She was doing domestic work.

Q Right. Right. A lot of Irish did that in this area. Did they find it better say--the conditions over here doing that work than in Ireland?

A Well of course you could get a job here doing whatever [inaudible] but I mean, in Ireland most people over there had large families and were born and raised on a farm, and really had to seek housework.

Q Had you gone to school in Ireland?

A Yes I had.

Q And through what grade, do you remember?

A It was in the national school, which is a public school.

Q That's not Catholic?

A It's Catholic, but it's still a national school. It's a public school.

Q Oh, I see. So you had nuns and so forth.

A No, we didn't have nuns at all. The girls all had nuns, but I mean we had just--I mean, they were paid by the government, I mean they were public

schools, and it was called a national school, the same as your public school here, but you were taught--you had religion about one hour a day, and that was the only religion we had, which was sufficient, I guess.

- Q Yeah. You found it sufficient. I was wondering about that, I mean the people who'd be listening to this might be interested what you thought about your education, and now, looking back on it, do you think they gave you enough education in those days?
- A Well, when you graduated the ninth grade in our national school, that was equivalent to two years of high school in this country.
- Q So it'd be the tenth or eleventh grade.
- A That's right, yes.
- Q Well that is a better deal.
- A But I mean, you're taught religion, but I mean if you were not a Catholic, Protestants came to the same school, because state religion, they could be excused.
- Q It wasn't forced on them.
- A No, no, no. It was entirely up to them. If they felt like . . .
- Q Ah, good. All right. So you came here, you had a sister living here.
- A I had two sisters. I had one here and I had another in Pittsburgh.
- Q And you started working. I mean, you came for a visit, but you started working.
- A No, I didn't come to visit, I come to get a job.
- Q Oh, all right. I knew you said you had a passage to L.A.
- A Yes, I did have, yeah. But I got here where my sister was, in Wilmington, and I had the one in Pittsburgh, and I decided to stay here after I was here a few weeks.
- Q Right. And can you tell us about what you thought of Wilmington, where you lived and so forth.
- A Well, my first job was down at the [sounds like Ben Shaw] Pipe Shops and there was some Irish there, which I met and liked and we worked down there well together. And then of course in the Depression Days. And I worked there for oh, I guess about a year, and things got real bad and I got laid off, so did some of the people here for several years [inaudible]. So I went in different other places and domestic work and got a job here and there. I finally got work as a gardener.
- Q For who?

A Mr. Evans. Mr. ^{Elwyn} ~~Alvin~~ Evans, lives in Greenville.

Q I see.

A And I worked there for I think about 12½ years. And then the war came along, you know, and I had to give up that work and I had to go either in defense work or Uncle Sam would. . .

Q Yeah, right. Now, what do you recall of Wilmington when you came here? Was it a good place?

A Wilmington was a nice town. It wasn't a very large place. I mean, there's a lot of industry in Wilmington, and I don't know, you got the DuPont Company and ~~Buckley's~~ and Atlas and they were sellin' them Alka Hercules Seltzer here. So it was a good place to get a job.

Q Where did you live when you came?

A I lived in [sounds like "Turbin Rooms"], was my first boarding house.

Q All right. What was that like?

A Well, it was all right, a nice family and very nice.

Q How much, do you remember?

A You mean how much board?

Q How much did it cost you, yeah.

A It cost me \$10 a week.

Q Room and board.

A Room and board, yeah. I was making only \$18 a week at the time.

Q So did you date a lot in those days?

A No. At 15 [?] years you don't date that much, the idea is to get a job and take care of yourself.

Q So you saved some money?

A Well, yes, I saved each week. Yeah, I saved each week, yeah. Not much, you couldn't with \$10 for board and you're only making \$18 a week, you didn't save too much, but you saved a little.

Q Did you find the Depression tough?

A It was very tough. [inaudible] and you're in the country and you're 21 years of age, which I was, and you're willing to work and work hard, long hours, of course you worked long hours on the farm, and nobody wants you and it's kind of depressing that you were willing to work and work for only your

room and board and yet there's no work.

Q Were you out of work much?

A Oh, about six weeks in the whole Depression.

Q Have you ever thought about going back in the middle of--when you were out of work?

A No. I heard they always said, "Prosperity's around the corner," so we were all looking for that corner when it finally showed up.

Q Great, great. Here's a question I didn't think to ask you earlier. What about politically in those day, were the Irish voting? When were you allowed to vote? I don't know the answer.

A Well, as long as you were 21 years of age you had--oh, no, you couldn't--see, you had to be citizen before you could vote.

Q Yeah. What was that, ten years?

A No, you had to be here five years.

Q Five years. All right, so that would have made it 1934--do you remember, were you for Roosevelt in those days?

A I was for Roosevelt because at that time there were so many people out of work that my first vote was for Roosevelt.

Q Did the Irish--I mean, were they pretty solid for Roosevelt?

A Well, at that time all working class was for Roosevelt because there were so many people out of work.

Q Right. And he was the one doing something about it.

A Yes he was, definitely was.

Q O.K. All right, let me see. We got up to the war. So where did you go to work then, when you left Mr. Evans?

A Well, I worked for a company called Gates Engineering Company. It had to do with synthetic rubber and I worked there from 1944 to 1949.

Q And then where did you go?

A Then after that then I went in business with two other fellows in tire and recapping, you know, and I stayed there for about two years and then I went back to gardening again, which I liked best, being born and raised on a farm, of course I loved outdoor life.

Q So you've been in this particular job ever since?

A Yes I have. Since 1950.

Q And who's got that. . .

A Man who owns the house, Mr. William A. ~~Wirt~~^{Worth}, of Greenville. He's the owner of the ~~Wirt~~^{Worth} Steel, young.

Q Have you lived out--we're really not in Wilmington now, we're in Greenville. Have you lived here long?

A I've lived here in Greenville for I don't know how long. Well, see, we lived in Centerville, not in Greenville, which is only a few miles apart, since 1950.

Q All right, for a final question, let me ask you, you left Ireland and you came here. Do you have any regrets? Do you think you made the right moves, coming here?

A Oh, I think so. I have never been back there, because after I was here so many years I got married and then we started to raise children and then the war started up and so I got deep rooted here, and I never got back, not because I didn't want to go back, but when you start raising a family, and you have five sons, and try to give them education, and you know, well you never get back. Not that I didn't want to, but I mean, my wife said you kind of get deep rooted when you're raisin' a family.

Q I just thought of something. I know you had a brother, at least one, who followed you over here, Tony.

A Yes.

Q Were you responsible in that, I mean did you write back, and. . . .

A Oh, we'd sometimes write back and forth and then he come out here a little bit later than we did, but he's doing very well.

Q Did he come for the same reason?

A Oh, yes, about the same reason, to better himself and to see what the story was. He had to find out for himself. And he was I guess Tony was--oh, I don't know how old he was, I mean he was more mature than I was.

Q O.K. Thank you very much.

A You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]