The following transcript was provided to Archives and Special Collections by The Gathering: Collected Oral Histories of the Irish in Montana with its associated audio recording.
CH: Beginning again, September 19, in Great Falls, Montana. I’m at the home of James Gillespie and Jim, could you go ahead and state your name for us?

JG: Yes, my name is James Edward Gillespie and I was born on March 5, 1928 in Great Falls.

CH: And you grew up here?

JG: Yes, I grew up here, finished high school in 1947.

CH: And did you go on to college?

JG: Yes, I attended the local college, College of Great Falls, for two years and then after that I spend my second two years in college in Missoula, at the University of Montana. I took business and graduated in Business Administration with a Bachelor of Science degree.

CH: And after college?
JG: After college the Korean War was on and knowing I was going to be drafted because I was out of deferred because of graduating, so as soon as I graduated I went off to war and got a job and knew I was going to war, which I did in July of ’54, ’52, I’m sorry.

CH: After your military career what did you do?

JG: Well, I returned to Great Falls for a few months and (phrase unintelligible). When I got out of the Army I was going to move out to Seattle and word unintelligible) off my career, which I did in 1955.

CH: And where did you work? What did you do in Seattle?

JG: I looked for a job and probably in three weeks I finally did get a job with Lincoln Savings and Loan in downtown Seattle and I worked there for about four-and-a-half years, going on five. The first four, three-and-a-half to four years I was single but I met my future bride and was married in Seattle in 1958, June of 1958. I was there for about a year while I was married and in 1959 we moved back to Great Falls. My wife was about eight months pregnant and we were looking for a house in Bellevue which was a small town at the time and also where the future children that we would have would want to go to school and I thought it would be better to raise the kids in a smaller town rather than a larger town like Seattle and I’d seen some of the tougher school and whatnot. Some of the schools were very good no doubt. So we returned in July 1959.
CH: To Seattle?

JG: To Great Falls.

CH: To Great Falls from the Seattle area. All right and what other jobs have you had?

JG: Well, I come back and joined my father who was having some medical problems. He was in real estate and insurance office and that was my main career the rest of my working life, which I retired from about 1996 or 7. So almost 40 years, 38 years I was in the self-employed in the insurance and real estate industry.

CH: At what age were you married?

JG: I had just turned 30.

CH: Is your spouse also of Irish ancestry?

JG: No she’s not, she’s probably mostly English and French. And I’m not sure what ever. There might be some Irish way back but we’re not sure.

CH: Okay. And how many children do you have?
JG: We have 3 children, 3 boys. The first one was born about a month after we got back to Great Falls which we knew was going to happen. And the three boys are close in age, right now they’re, the oldest one is 50 and 48 and 47.

CH: And what are their names?

JG: Starting with the oldest, William or Bill, Stephan or Steve and Michael or Mike.

CH: All right. And when did your ancestors leave Ireland?

JG: My father came over and I’m not sure of the year. He was, he never talked much about his days in Ireland, although well, once in a while, I heard him talk about towns in County Sligo, of course I knew that and Tyrone for the Corry. And what was the question now?

CH: When did they leave and where did they leave from?

JG: We’re not sure. We can’t find his records. Whether he came, I assumed he came through Ellis Island but I, we could never find the records for it and my wife has kind of researched it and looked and couldn’t find it. Some of his relatives came through Canada and I kind of think maybe that’s where he came through, the east coast of Canada because he did come to Minneapolis from Ireland. He had an aunt lived there and he came to live with her.
CH: What was her name?

JG: Her name was, can’t think. Let’s see, can’t think of her first name...It was Mullen. He always called her aunt so I never heard it probably.

CH: And how about your mother? Did she come from Ireland?

JG: She was born in Great Falls. But both her parents came from Ireland. Her father, Roger Corry and her mother was Minnie McKenna.

CH: And do you know what part of Ireland their, her family, came?

JG: The grandmother came from County Tyrone in Northern Ireland. She was Catholic and she was from a small village called 6 Mile Cross. She came over with her brother, Jim McKenna, and stayed near the Neihart, the Neihart (?) area with an uncle, Frank McKenna, no Frank Rafferty, I’m sorry, Frank Rafferty. Her mother’s maiden name was Rafferty so that name was through her.

CH: Okay. And what does your Irish ancestry mean to you?
JG: Well, I’d grown up in Great Falls around many other friends that were Irish and you know from kids on up to adulthood we were around during St. Patrick’s Day. And my dad was quite Irish but he never talked (phrase unintelligible) around, of course we lived out in the country, and didn’t talk much about his days in Ireland.

CH: Do you know how your dad came to Montana? What brought him to Montana?

JG: Well yes. He, his first job in Minneapolis he told me was delivering Western Union telegrams on a bicycle and so I don’t know the exact year of time but he got a job on the railroad and he was a fireman on an engine where they shoveled the fire, the coal into the fire and made the steam to make the engines roll. And that I think, in those days they (never?) got much past 8th grade, he never discussed it with me but he did, he told me he got a manual, studied for taking the test to be an engineer and he passed it and he became an engineer. So the work on the railroad took him out to Butte and Helena area and seems he was stationed out of Clancy which is just south toward Butte from Helena, just 5-10 miles. He always talked about being around Clancy. But I know he ran the train fro Butte through to Great Falls and whatnot. Then he located in Great Falls because he had a sister here, Margaret Hanna was her married name.

CH: Okay. And once he came to Great Falls, did he stay here permanently then?

JG: Yes.
CH: After marrying your mother?

JG: Um hm. He met my mother while he was in Great Falls and stayed here. He worked for a Minneapolis law firm for a short time, just making contacts for clients and whatnot. He wasn’t practicing the field of law but he was (phrase unintelligible). And he became a partner in a real estate insurance office with two other fellows named Conn Robinson and a fellow name Shirdoff (?) That was his last name, I can’t recall what his first name was. But they both kind of dropped out and he stayed on and had his business in the office, pretty much the same office where I got involved in about 1996 or 97. Oh, I’m sorry, that’s when I retired.

CH: That’s when you retired.

JG: That’s right, when I retired, yeah.

CH: And you got into business with him about?

JG: About 1959 when I came back from Seattle.

CH: Do you know how he met your mother?

JG: No but I think it was, they used to go out to dances in a small country town south of Great Falls called Eden which isn’t a town anymore. But they used to go to dances with a lot of Irish
and he was in the Hibernians and somewhere, I never knew exactly where they met but
seemed liked he liked to dance and once he met my mother Marie he, that was it.

CH: All right. And do you have any stories about your parents from your, their young life
together or any traditions, things that you remember as being part of their ancestry?

JG: Ah really. My mother’s parents were both alive when I was a young child. Her father Roger
Corry was a fireman in Great Falls, he came from County Mayo I believe. I’m not really too up
on the Corry end of that but they had, we were around the family quite a bit and she had 6,
there was 5 girls and 1 boy in her family and they mostly married, a couple of them married
Irish fellows and we always had parties at Christmas time and we got together a lot. My father
was not much of a club member. He joined the Hibernians but I don’t think he was too active.
We kind of grew up in the normal time during the Depression in Great Falls in the ’30’s. I did.
And I can’t think of any particular things other that he used to o Sea.... His time on the railroad
didn’t last too long because he was in a pretty bad train wreck. It was a head-on collision. That
was before I was born. So he was in the real estate business after that. That’s how he got out of
the train business. But we grew up with a lot of Irish people we knew around, the Egans and the
Dolans and whatnot. And others. I always knew, we’re kind of proud of our Irish heritage, we
always were. We’re Catholic. My father didn’t attend church much but he was Catholic. He was
raised a Catholic.

(Phone rings)
CH: Did you have any practices or traditions in your home with your parents and siblings because of their Irish heritage? Did they bring any of the things that they grew up with to share with their children?

JG: No, no really. My dad seemed to, every once in a while he’d go off talking about some old friend from Ireland and he mentioned a couple of little towns; he talked, there’s a town called Knock and a town called (name unintelligible). He talked very little about it and I’m really sorry today that I didn’t pursue questioning him more on it, more about his childhood. I tried to think about what it was like when he grew up and he never talked about it much. I don’t know if he wasn’t proud of it or if he was just a poor, he had a large family. I think there were 10 in his, Betty knows better than I do about this, had maybe 12 kids in his family. His mother died when he was young and his father remarried. He just kind of grew up. Because it was a small house it seemed like they had to get out and leave and make room for the next kids coming up. So I think he was about, I’m guessing he was about 14 or 15 years old when he came over from Ireland to live with an aunt. And it just seemed like he got away from Ireland and he always was proud of his being Irish but he wasn’t real active in organizations. He joined but he wasn’t real active.

CH: Do you think your parents focused more on just being American?
JG: Yes. Yeah. He got his citizenship, he always very proud that he was an American citizen and he just became American all the way. He wasn’t typically old Irish, he wasn’t, you wouldn’t know it so much, he had a little inflection in his voice that you’d catch that Irish, but not a heavy brogue or anything like that. He really turned American. He was a businessman who really didn’t have that lengthy, I’m not even sure of the extent of his education but he knew right from wrong. He was in business a long time on his own (word unintelligible), had no problems, he avoided problems but he was a very upstanding type citizen.

CH: What was your childhood home like in Great Falls?

JG: He had a, when I was a young child like in first grade, when I was in kindergarten we lived on 31st Street in a rented house.

CH: Are you the oldest child, James?

JG: No, I have a sister that was a year and a half older than me—Betty. But we moved, when I was in first grade, down to a three story house that had about 5 or 6 apartments in it and he owned that house and he never talked very much about how he got it, it was old when he got it but I think it might have been, he might have had a small settlement out of that wreck that he had on the Great Northern. It couldn’t have been very much, houses were very cheap then. But a lot of people had lived in that apartment or several other apartments in the house just to make ends meet in Depression days and, ah, he always seemed to do good enough in real
estate even through the Depression because and we lived in a, going back to the house, we lived on the main floor and there was about five or six other small units, some two bedroom, some one bedroom, in that house but we lived fairly cramped. It wasn’t a very big apartment, there was a living room and two bedrooms.

CH: How many children in your family?

JG: Three. There was an older sister and a younger sister by about 5 years who was Down’s syndrome. So that was hard on my mother throughout the years, taking care of her. She was very loyal to her, loved her very much.

CH: Were they able to keep her in the home?

JG: No. When she grew up, she had her own private tutors and there was a neighborhood lady, Mrs. (name unintelligible) who helped train kids. They didn’t have the formal. But as she got older they said it was best for her to go to a school in Bu-, in Boulder Montana between Helena and Butte. A school for children with down syndrome and all so she spent several years there and then they closed that and I can’t think of the year but it would have been like in the ‘70’s and then kind of tried to get back in the mainstream and they had group homes here in Great Falls and she, she attained the age of 60 and she died very suddenly one night in her sleep. So it was a sudden thing but she grew up to more of a, a higher age than most did. It seemed like 60 was old for Down’s syndrome then.
CH: Okay. And when you were growing up, were you a member of a church or a religious group with your family?

JG: Well, my mother trained us to go, to be, you know, Catholic. We were baptized and made our first communion at St. Ann’s Cathedral in Great Falls which is about 3 blocks from where I lived. And she saw to it that my sister and I went to mass in the morning, on Sunday morning. My father didn’t attend church, but he was always shocked to hear that somebody left the church to go somewhere else. He thought that was terrible—

CH: What feast days or holidays were especially important in your family that you remember? How did you celebrate those?

JG: Well, I’d say mostly Christmas. We didn’t, from when I was a small child, up to high school, we’d go to my grandmother’s house, my mother’s mother, Minnie Corry, and have Christmas dinner and then her sisters with their husbands, some of them (word unintelligible) Corry and we’d all meet there and we’d always have a present opening and the men would always have a few beers, or whatever and so it was a big party type thing.

CH: Sing or play any particular games or—
JG: Na, sing and open presents and somebody’d play the piano and play music and they’d dance in the kitchen.

CH: American dancing or were they doing Irish dancing?

JG: No, American. We didn’t really traditional Irish like the ones that, uh, like I say, my mother was born in America. And my father he, I hate to say it, well I shouldn’t say that. He like to play cards. He always played in downtown taverns. He played sometimes poker but pinochle and (word unintelligible). He just liked cards so a lot of times it was my mother and two sisters that were at these family functions and my father wasn’t too much a part of them. He did his own thing.

CH: Okay. Let’s see, did you notice, in your community of Irish family and friends, did you notice that there were shared physical traits: Did people look alike or being from a lot of different places did you see a lot of differences? You, obviously by your message, you felt like you belonged in your community. You felt a sense of belonging in your community.

JG: I, yeah, we had some relations on my mother’s side, we were quite close to Bill and Nellie Casey. They were very Irish. They both came from Ireland. They practiced the Irish, they were stronger Catholics than us. We associated a lot with them. They weren’t first cousins, they were about second cousins and the children were about our ages, Dolores and PJ, Patrick. So we grew up a few blocks apart and socially were with them quite a bit but mostly around our
immediate family, my mother’s sisters and their husbands. There was a Kelly in there and there was a, a, most of them weren’t Irish I guess.

CH: Did you ever notice a discussion or a concern, about the motherland, Ireland, from Irish families in Great Falls? Were they ever concerned about the troubles or any of the things that went on?

JG: I didn’t hear much, other than they talked about Ireland, you know, everybody was poor but they sang and they danced and, they were fond of their heritage but they came over here. They didn’t talk a lot about the actual, what was going on when they were growing up in Ireland (phrase unintelligible). They just seemed to grow up and come over here.

CH: Do you remember any food traditions in your family that were particularly Irish from your grandmother or your mother?

JG: No, my mother would make stew sometimes. I always liked that. She did a good job on it. I can’t think of any particular Irish cuisine or food that we normally would have.

CH: So you don’t have any recipes that have been handed down to you?

JG: I don’t think so. Not that I know of.
CH: Okay. And how about family heirlooms and keepsakes? Do you (know?) some special items from your mother’s family probably. It doesn’t sound like your dad brought a lot.

JG: No, he didn’t. He just left and came over here and was close to (word unintelligible) because he had relatives, cousins in Minneapolis. I can’t think of any. My grandmother was quite Irish, she’s the one who came over as a McKenna and got married over here but I can’t think of any Irish possessions that she would, that would stand out.

CH: Okay. Was McKenna her married name or do you know her maiden name? Your grandmother?

JG: That was her married name. I’m sorry, her married name was Corry. Her maiden name was McKenna.

CH: Okay. Great. All right. Now, Jim, do you personally partake in any traditions or rituals which are of Irish origin as an adult?

JG: I really don’t. I joined the Knights of Columbus when I was still in college, my senior year over in Missoula, myself and a couple of other fellows that were Irish, or American Irish, and then never got back, went into the Army and I never got back. I got approached a couple times and then I, but I didn’t really want to. I’m not much of a club man.
CH: How about music? Was music a big part of your life? Did anyone in your family play instruments?

JG: My mother played the piano, but not, just kind of played around, just for her own entertainment more than anything. No, we didn’t, we weren’t musical.

CH: All right. And ah, in your personal life, what are the most striking changes in your lifetime that you, that have made a strong impression on you?

JG: I can’t think of any event that’s changed my life other than getting married which is typical of anybody and starting a family. I worked all my life and—

CH: And you did your service time prior to your marriage?

JG: Yes. Two years in the army.

CH: And if you could write an Irish history of Montana for your family, what, what would you like to include in it?

JG: Well, my father had several sisters here I came to know. I don’t know what I’d write if I wanted to write a story about the family I’d write that he had the several sisters her and in Helena. He was fond of his family. He wanted to keep contact with them. Through the years.
they lived in different towns. We grew up here and, like I said, I went out to Seattle but
returned. There was no life changing event. From start to finish, I got up, worked and retired.
Sounds kind of dull.

CH: No, not really.

JG: I guess I’ve had a life that’s not, I didn’t reach great wealth but I always made a living so I did
fine, and put up some for retirement and that went fine. I don’t think I’ve had any major
problems in my life, not that, major medical or disaster, no divorce, no unusual incidents that
stand out.

CH: Well, you’re participated in the Gathering because you’re obviously proud of your Irish
heritage. Have you passed that tradition on down to your boys also?

JG: Well, they’re different, they’re half Irish (phrase unintelligible) Irish. I think they got a little
taste of the Irish just from some of the uncles that I had, where were, well, I shouldn’t say they,
they married my mother’s sisters. They always stuck to the Irish pride, proud of the Irish, but
we didn’t, not some of the traditional Irish that (word unintelligible) belongs to the Knight and
Irish doings that went on.

CH: Did you ever meet any of your father’s immediate family?
JG: You know, we took a trip to Ireland in 2001. In fact, we were over there when the 9/11 event happened. And we met one of (name unintelligible) cousin and her husband and we took a tour through Corrytown (?) in County Sligo and we went with the other couple and right after that (word unintelligible) everything was closed and we never, didn’t find any Irish connections. We went again in 2006 when we were having our, my wife got connected with some Irish relatives through the Internet when she went on in genealogy and tracing down connections. So we went over in 2006 to Corrytown (?) to a Gillespie reunion and that was probably one of the best trips I ever had. And they had three days of events and went out to the old homestead where my father was raised, which was a rock stone house, it is broken down in shambles now but at least I could see where he grew up and I was impressed because it was on a beautiful piece of land on the side of what they call mountains there but they’d be large hills here. But they had mostly, they didn’t have crops, they had mostly cattle or sheep.

CH: So did you see your father in those people, the other Gillespies?

JG: No, I’ve seen a lot of other Gillespies that I’ve seen the resemblance, absolutely. I did meet a, my father’s mother died and his father remarried and then, I guess she died and he married a third time Anyway, the last child he had, he had quite a few, he had like 13 with Mary, his mother, my father’s mother 12 or 13, no 11 or 12. But his father, John, which he never talked about, I think he wasn’t a happy person growing up. I’m assuming that, but John had a wife later, after Margaret (name unintelligible) had long gone and they had a daughter named Attracta which is an unusual name. And I never had heard of her and I don’t think my father did.
either, but before 2006 when I went over, one of my, cousin and my nieces, my sister’s girl, had
gone over there and found out that there was an Attracta that was a half-sister of my father
Martin. And she had a daughter, I can’t think of her name but anyhow, we met the daughter,
which would be a half first cousin of mine. But I could see some resemblance there from the
Gillespie side.

CH: Did you notice any change in the way your father used his name in America as it was used
in Ireland or is it the very same spelling and?

JG: Yes it was. His name is spelled now the same as it was then.

CH: What is his name?

JG: Martin J. or Joseph Gillespie.

CH: Okay.

JG: There are a lot of Gillespies over there in Ireland and in Scotland too. Some people say they
all come from Scotland or maybe they all came from Ireland. Who knows?

CH: Right. All right. And have those been your only two trips to Ireland?
JG: Yes.

CH: Okay, you enjoyed that. Is there anything else that you’d like to add to our interview?

JG: Well, I can’t think, let’s see, no.

CH: Anything else on your notes there that you wrote down that we haven’t already touched upon?

JG: Let me think.

(Pause while he looks through notes)

JG: Just that both my grandparents were Irish and my mother’s parents, and my dad. I never knew any of his, you know his mother died and his father. I never knew him either, my grandfather. Pretty much what I’ve talked about.

CH: All right. Well, that’s wonderful.

JG: Not anything outstanding.

CH: Well, it’s been a great pleasure to be able to talk to you Jim.
JG: Well, I’m sorry I didn’t have more information for you but—

CH: Well, it’s your information that we’re interest in.

JG: I’ve had a decent life. Well, my father was, I very much loved my father but like I say, a lot of times he wasn’t at events because he liked to go play cards. But he was self employed, successful businessman and had a good reputation. Always honest.

CH: And as for you a good businessman in this community and following in your father’s footsteps. That is great. Well, all right, we’ll sign off for now and I thank Jim very much for being part of The Gathering.

JG: Well I wish I had better memory or more information for you but at my age I’m finding I get forgetful.

[End of Interview]