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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.
Colleen Holzheimer: Okay. It is September 24, 2010. I’m with Una Koontz and she is going to talk today about her Irish family. And, Una, will you begin by telling us what your name is?

Una Koontz: It’s Una Koontz.

CH: Where and when were you born?

UK: I was born here in Great Falls in 1945, August 11.

CH: And so you spent all your life in Great Falls?

UK: Almost. For about 5 years I lived out in Washington State, but the rest of the time, and then actually our family moved out to a farm near Belt, and that’s where I went to high school but my adult life most of it’s been here.

CH: And what kind of jobs have you had?

UK: I started off as a teacher, moved on to being a librarian, spent most of my life as librarian and then the last 10 years I worked as a massage therapist.

CH: And what do you do for a living now?

UK: I am retired.

CH: Were you married?

UK: No, I’m not.

CH: Then you probably didn’t have any children.

UK: No, I don’t.
CH: All right. Do you know when your ancestors left Ireland and where did they leave from?

UK: Yes, I have 3 Irish grandparents. So, first of all, my mother’s father was Roger, well in Ireland it was Corr; C-o-r-r, when they came over here they changed it to Curry, C-u-r-r-y. And, let’s see, I have done a little research on it. So he made his intention to be a citizen in New York in 1893 and he came from, I believe it was called Irishtown, in Mayo County Ireland. And that was a part of Ireland that was hit very hard by the famine, although he was not living during that time, and he became a citizen here in Montana in 1900. Do you want me to do all three of my grandparents?

CH: Sure. That would be fine. Do that

UK: Okay. Then his wife, my grandmother on my mother’s side, came from Tyrone. She was born in an area called Ballyholan (spelling?) and she came here with her brother in 1902. Her uncle had sent for them, and the story is that the uncle sent for her sister and brother and last minute her sister canceled out and so she came on her sister’s passport. Though she was Sarah Ann she went by Minnie here, probably afraid to change it back but when I was a teenager she finally told us her real name. So it took a long time. And she came here with her brother, they landed in Quebec, traveled through Canada and came, right to Montana and went to Neihart where their uncle lived on a dairy farm.

CH: What was her uncle’s name?

UK: He was Rafferty, Frank Rafferty. And that was an uncle on her mother’s side. And the truth, two of the Rafferty brothers were there, I don’t know, mining or whatever, and the story was that when they finally got to Neihart the uncle had died, and one of them did die but the other
one was still living so they stayed with him a while and then finally came to Great Falls, a few years later.

CH: And was Sarah’s name, her sister’s name on her passport? Or was that her real name, Sarah Ann?

UK: Her sister’s name Minnie was on the passport and so she stayed with that name,

CH: Even though her name was Sarah, her given name.

UK: Yes. Her citizenship and everything says Minnie, so she just stayed with it. And then the third grandparent, that’s on my dad’s side, she was Winifred Cahalan. And she was born in Iowa, but it was her father, Patrick Cahalan who came from Tipperary. So, three different areas of Ireland.

CH: Do you know why, other than you told us about Sarah, do you know why either of your great-grandfathers, left Ireland? Have you heard any stories?

UK: I know, I don’t know much about the Cahalans. I know a little more about the Currys. This is the story my mother told me. Apparently his parents wanted him to become a priest and he did not want to so, he headed off to America. And he had brothers there already too although his brothers were already here.

CH: Do you know what age he was when he left Ireland?

UK: Let me think a little bit. Um he was born in 1870 and I believe he was in New York in 1893 so that would make him about 23.

CH: Okay. And what does your Irish ancestry mean to you personally?

UK: Um (laughs). That is a hard question. I think, well, growing up here, at least on my mother’s side, which is kind of the Curry-McKenna, they formed a very close-knit extended family and, in
a lot of ways I grew up almost, you know my cousins were almost more like brothers and
sisters. I think that was one thing they gave us. I think my grandmother, she was a McKenna-
Curry, was very strong in her Faith, I think both of my grandmothers were, and it was the
Catholic Faith, and so that was something that was very much a part of your life. And my
grandmother Curry was someone who was very, kind of, sedate, quiet, very wise, kind of a
strong woman, so that kind of calm, you know, deal- with-things type. But what I saw in the
men was a lot of drinking so they get together and they really partied. And I must say the
women would sit in the living room in a row and the men would be in the kitchen all drinking.
So I kind of thought everyone did that and it took me a long time to realize that not everybody
drank too much on the holidays. But they had great fun. They went camping in the summer-
times and they got together on the holidays but a funeral or a wedding was a time to...
CH: Did you ever hear any stories that the men might have been sharing while they were having
their party? Or were you more focused on the women?
UK: I was probably more with the women. You know I know my dad would tell stories about
things that they did but it wasn’t necessarily at the parties.
CH: All right. And we’ve talked about when your family first came to the United States and
where they first settled and that was because they had acquaintances or family in that area. Is
that correct?
UK: Yes.
CH: Okay. And how did they make their living?
UK: Um, well, my grandfather, Roger Curry, when he first arrived in New York, I have his driver’s
license, he was a hackney coach driver, so it was with a horse. And I’ve got it in here yes, in

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Montana-Missoula.
1893 so that is what he did. And I don’t know how long he was there. At some point he came out to Montana. His older brother, Michael, was here in Great Falls and so, he wasn’t here, maybe a few years, I think he worked at the smelter, and then he went into the Spanish-American war and was there for a couple of years. And I do have some documents in here. And he was in the Philippines. He contracted, he had malaria, and, intestinal, I guess you’d say infections and so forth that bothered him the rest of...He was discharged because he was that sick. So when he came back to Great Falls he always had problems with that. He did, there’s a form in here that he filled out saying that he could not do physical labor anymore because of that. But he did work at the smelter a little bit more and then I think most of the last years of his working life, he was a fireman. Um, but I will say, you know where they lived in Great Falls, he came from a rural background and they had a chicken house and they had a milk cow and they had a garden, so you know there was some of that farming culture that came with him.

CH: And how about the women in your background? Were they mostly homemakers?

UK: Yes.

CH: Did any of them work outside the home?

UK: My grandmother, Minnie McKenna-Curry, stayed at home. Um, my other grandmother, Winifred Cahalan, her first husband died maybe 5 or 6 years after they married; he was kicked in the head by a horse, so she had these two little boys to take care of. And she worked in a post office; she worked as a telephone operator. Eventually, um, she came from a very musical family, and maybe I’ll talk about that a little more later. But she, her brothers they were traveling musicians, and they traveled from Chicago out to Washington and they finally homesteaded in Montana, asked her to come out and teach their kids and her kids and be a
teacher. And, I don’t know, there wasn’t much training needed in those days but she ended up teaching in rural schools for many years and then finally ended up teaching I think it was piano, violin and guitar. But she even filled in one year at the College of Great Falls for the music teacher there so she did have, yes, a very good background. But she did work.

CH: Other than that you mentioned about the Curry name being changed. Are, there, have any of the other family names undergone changes? Were there any stories that you heard about those?

UK: Not really, but the McKenna, I actually went to Ireland and it was McKenna there. But when I told the priest I was looking for McKennas he just said that everybody here is a McKenna and in doing research I finally found out that there’s all these different strains and some were Elish-McKenna (?) and the Rafferty’s are Cobb-Rafferty (?)

CH: Very interesting. Are there any traditional first names or nicknames in your family and, if so, what are they?

UK: (Laughs.) They used the same names over and over. I have to tell you this is little story, it’s a little sidetrack but it illustrates it. Roger’s older brother, Michael Corry, came here with a friend/cousin, Luke Curry, same name, same town. In Irishtown they were both sons of Luke Curry, with a mother Mary, and of course the Irish named their first son Luke. Both Michael and Luke named their first sons Luke, their first daughters Mary when they lived here in Great Falls. So it gets all confusing. Then Michael also had a brother Luke who came out to Great Falls and so at one point there were four Luke Currys in Great Falls. There was also my grandmother, Minnie McKenna-Curry, her mother was Catherine so she named her daughter Catherine and some of the Currys also named their daughters Catherine. I have a sister Catherine. That’s one
name that’s common. My one grandmother was Winifred on my dad’s side but my mother was Winifred and her nickname was Una; that’s Irish-Gaelic for Winifred so my Una is after the Gaelic. That’s another one that went through. And lots of Patricks, Michaels and with the McKennas it’s Frank, over and over, and Catherine again. Um, trying to think. John, Francis, Margaret, was a women’s name used over and over. Those are the main ones that I can think of.

CH: Okay. Did your family have any naming traditions, at baptism, or namings that did they have any practices that you grew up with.

UK: Not that I know of. Uh-huh.

CH: Okay. All right. And let’s see, you were born in the U.S. and you are not a first generation immigrant.

UK: No.

CH: (Pause). I’m just reading the text here for a moment. What kind of entertainment, home entertainment, did you grow up with? Was there story telling, did you have music, any kind of craft traditions?

UK: Well, I think one might be music. In the Cahalan family there were 17 children and they lived on a farm in Iowa and I forget my grandmother once listed all the instruments they had but I think you know there were 11 boys, so the younger ones, there was no place for them on the farm so they’re the ones that formed the Cahalan Brothers Harp Orchestra, five younger brothers and sometimes some of their sisters, including my grandmother, traveled with them. But she would talk about going to silent theatres and her brothers would run the movie and she would play the piano and one brother would tell her whether to play fast or slow or what kind

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of music to play while the other one was running the movie so she, I think, kept a love of music in with my dad and his brother. My uncle had a beautiful singing voice, Jack Koontz. And I think he kind of passed it on with his family. Most of us learned to play at least one instrument you know, in band and so forth. Um, on my mother’s side mom told me that when she was a kid, her parents would invite the Irish friends and relatives over; they’d roll back the rugs and dance the Irish jigs and what not in the living room. And there were five girls and one boy in that family. The girls seemed to love to sing and dance. That’s how I think my mom met my dad. They were great dancers and so even after they married they did square dancing and if they went out for an evening it would be to dance, so a lot of music in that way. When we got together for our big Christmas Eve, different of us cousins would be asked to perform and somebody, I would play piano and another cousin might sing so that music kind of stuck with us. That would be the biggest thing. I think my Cahalan grandmother, Winnie Cahalan-Koontz, did a lot of needlepoint, embroidery, that kind of thing. Tatting, she taught me how to tat, I have her little tatting shuttle, from way back when. I think those are the main things.

CH: Okay, wonderful. Were you involved in any sports, and did you ever learn to play any Gaelic games, that part of your family?

UK: No, I don’t think so.

CH: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your growing up, where you lived growing up in Great Falls, and how many were in your household.

UK: Okay. Well, when I was first born, we were out in the country.

CH: That’s in Belt? East of Great Falls?
UK: Yes and that was a little house with no electricity and no plumbing and my dad built a windmill and we had one light bulb in the kitchen. My mom had gotten, was developing, rheumatoid arthritis so, I think because of that, they moved back into Great Falls and lived here for a while. We lived on 4th Ave. North, two different houses, 1921 and 2025, and while we were in Great Falls my two younger siblings were born so then there were five of us and

CH: Would you mention the members of your family, your siblings?

UK: The oldest is Cathy. She’s 7 years older, Roger, named after Roger Curry, was 2 years older, I might mention Catherine was a family name also. Then younger than me was Fred and he was named after his grandfather, Fred Koontz. And the youngest was Patricia.

CH: Okay, great. And what kind of responsibilities did you have at home growing up, did you have chores, how did you share the household tasks?

UK: Okay. One thing my mother would say was she did not want us to work as hard as her mother made her work at home doing household tasks so she was very careful about how much she gave us. My job was usually to dry dishes. I will mention that when we moved out to the country the second time when I was 10, Cathy was old enough that she did not move with us so at that point I took over you know drying dishes. Mom always washed. I set the table, cleared the table; we had a big garden so I helped take care of the garden and the flower beds. The other thing was my younger sister, Patricia, was handicapped; she was profoundly retarded, so I was a babysitter for her. When she was little it wasn’t too hard to take her places but when she was older it was too hard so often I would stay home and take care of her. So that was kind of one of my important things. Or, whenever I came home from school mom would maybe cook dinner and be doing things like that, so I would take care of Patty. For the most
part, if I played piano she’d bounce on the davenport and so I’d grab a handful of cookies and put them on the piano and Patty and I would eat cookies and I’d play the piano and she bounced. And that was one of the kind of daily chores you might say.

CH: Is Patty still alive today?

UK: Yes, she is in a group home here in Great Falls.

CH: And how long did she stay at your family home before she was able to go to a group home to live?

UK: Well, she was at only home for 7 years and then she went to Boulder. They didn’t have group homes back then, this would have been in the early ‘60s, so that’s what was encouraged by the doctors and so forth at that time. So she was there for over 40 years. So she’s only been here—

CH: 40 years?

UK: 40 years at Boulder. So she’s been in Great Falls just 4 or 5 years. And I can see much more of her.

CH: Great. That’s wonderful. Could you tell us a little bit about your formal education?

UK: Okay. Well, I went to the University of Montana. I got a BA in education, elementary education, and from there I went out and taught in Washington. And then I went and got, in Washington you had to get a fifth year to teach beyond four years, so I went to Central Washington State and got a fifth year in science education and a library minor. I liked the library so much that I ended up getting a Masters in Denver, University of Denver.

CH: And what things did you involve yourself in, extra-circular, in your secondary education, your post-secondary education? What were your interests and hobbies?
UK: Well, high-school through College and played percussion and was in the band, symphony marching band, marching band, that was great fun. The University in Missoula is known as the dancing school and so I got to be in the band as we danced out on the football field. I guess that was the main thing. I was mostly busy studying. I loved to read and I did sewing, made most of my clothes.

CH: Are you still in close contact with those cousins that you grew up with, that were close like family to you? Could you talk a little bit about that?

UK: Yeah, well, there were five of us born within three years and I was the oldest. Next came Sherry Kelly (spelling?). She was 6 months younger and we were just kind of buddies all the way through. Our mothers were very good friends. And so Sherry and her family lived on Central Avenue. I was on 4th Ave. North so we would walk and meet each other half way and then go play at the house of one or the other. So we would spend a lot of time together beyond the, just you know, any of the holidays or family gatherings we just got together and kind of ignored the rest of the family. Then, Sheila Flaherty. And Nancy Kelly. Sheila was like, what, 2 years younger and Nancy, 3 years younger. They were both born on August 22, one year apart. They were close buddies. But of course as we got older the four of us kind of formed into a group. And their families would go up to the lake in the summertime and they would take me along with them so we had like a week together in the summer. Our families were friends and so our mothers were and so you know, we got together a lot of times. The youngest was Bob Fox, poor fellow, and so sometimes he would try to join us but I think he was pretty bored with us. He passed away last April. But the rest of us still get together. Sherry’s in California. But this summer for example, she comes up, summers; she’s a yoga teacher, so she comes up for
workshops outside Helena so I go up to see her. Nancy’s in Sidney, Sheila in Kalispell. That’s as far apart as you can get and still be in Montana so we get together once in a while but not very often.

CH: Great. How about family members that were involved in the military? You made one reference earlier. What can you tell us about family members that were in the military?

UK: Well, let’s see. Roger Curry was in the Spanish-American war and his older brother William, he came about 1882 and was in the army, and I think he was discharged in 1888, so he was in the army way back then.

CH: In the U S Army?

UK: Yes, um, I think one of my mom’s sisters, her older sister, Catherine married Bill Fox, he was a Seabee. In the—

CH: Navy.

UK: Yes, would have been.

CH: Okay.

UK: I think that’s it.

CH: Great. Okay, why don’t we move on to religious special practices, rites and festivals? You did talk a little bit about your family gatherings. When you were growing up did you recognize that you belonged in an Irish American community? Or did everyone seem about the same as you?

UK: I think because of the extended family I was very aware of being Irish American. I was also very aware that my Koontz last name didn’t fit. A lot of my relatives could never quite say it or even spell it and it was like.
CH: Your Irish relatives?

UK: Yes. First cousins. I mean (phrase unintelligible?) I always thought of myself as Irish and when people would assume I was German I was kind of shocked and thought “Why do you think that?” And, you know, I just as I was younger I was very Irish.

CH: Did you grow up as a member of a church or religious group?

UK: Yes, we were very much into the Catholic Church. We went to Catholic school at St. Gerard’s. Of course once we moved out in the country we didn’t but we always went to church. That was something my mom was very strong in and I think her mother before her.

CH: Were there any church rituals rites, or feast days, like say St. Patrick’s Day, that you, that were memorable to you, that you practiced or observed?

UK: Well St Patrick’s Day was one. That was the one holiday that all the adults got together and left all us kids at home (Laughs)

CH: (Laughs). Where did they go?

UK: (Laughs). They went to somebody’s home and I think they had a great time without the kids. So, I don’t know much about it other than that I always had to baby sit. (Clock chimes) Um the, you know I mentioned Christmas and that was when we always got together, Christmas Eve, and there was a part of it, you know when it got to be heading toward midnight, a lot of us would head out to midnight mass and then come back again and the party would, you know, start to break up. But midnight mass was a part of Christmas Eve. It wasn’t, just, you know, the family.

CH: Okay. Let’s see. Are you, do you still participate in your faith you were raised in?

UK: I do.
And have those traditions that you grew up with, have they changed, like Christmas Eve and St. Patrick’s Day, as the family has grown and separated? Has that changed?

Yes, the Christmas Eve thing, you know my grandmother Corry, and she’s the one McKenna, we went to her home. We continued that and then she died in like in ’68-’69, and that party continued until about 1999. And then, enough relatives, my generation, we were spread so there’s not a lot of us left in town so that kind of fell apart.

Okay. Let’s see, we talked about your community and history as you grew up and what members of your family were doing. Thinking about those members of your family and your three Irish branches of your family, would you say that there are shared physical traits among family members?

Yes, there is one, kind of a negative one, coming through the Raffertys. They tend to develop some form of arthritis. My Uncle John was, had rheumatoid arthritis. He went off to college and came home and he never worked. He just, his body, you know, this was like in the 30’s and so they didn’t know what to do so he basically was, lived at home, kind of an invalid. My mom they also thought had rheumatoid arthritis but it never developed that badly. One of the Pat, um, Patrick Rafferty, he was a first cousin to my grandmother, he was known as the Stone man in Columbus Hospital here and it was some form of arthritis. But it was not rheumatoid. But it was worse than that.

And they called him Stone man because of his physical characteristics?

Yes, he spent like 20 years in the hospital, and he just lay there. So my cousin Sherry is developing the same kind that he had. It begins with an “A” Anglo- something or other. When
we went to Ireland we met another one with that and heard about one in England. So that particular characteristic is there.

CH: Okay. All right, let’s see. Let’s move on to some other things to see if they impacted your family. Do, within your family did you have any special sayings or expressions? And if so, what were they?

UK: You know my Grandmother Curry was known for her frank remarks and off the top of my head I don’t remember any.

CH: Well, if they pop up during our conversation, feel free to add it.

UK: Okay.

CH: Okay. How about food? Do you have any special food traditions in your family and do you have any recipes that have been passed down?

UK: Well, you know growing up we always had to have boiled potatoes for dinner. Dinner wasn’t dinner unless you had a boiled potato. Um, I’m trying to think if there was anything else. My sister Cathy tells a story. She married a fellow that was German and he insisted that she put garlic on her pork roast and my mother hated garlic and Cathy didn’t like it so she was talking to my grandmother Curry one day and she said “Oh, Bill makes me put garlic in the pork roast and grandmother Curry spoke up and said “Well, I always do that” so that was one that we discovered (laughs). But I don’t have any recipes, you know it was mostly meat and potato with a vegetable.

CH: Very basic. Okay. All right, any holiday foods that came out just at your Christmas Eve celebrations or anything?

UK: Not that I can think of.
CH: Okay. All right, let’s move on to mementos and keepsakes. What family heirlooms or keepsakes or mementos do you possess?

UK: Well, I have, I have this one the, called the “Honest Day” plate (Aneus Dei?) My mother gave to her mother. So it’s not real real old but the significance is that my grandmother Sarah Ann/ Minnie grew up on a farm in Ballyholan and when they were out in the work fields every noon the bells would ring and they’d say the Angelus, I guess it is, and so this was the workers out in the field, Irish workers, saying the Angelus. And um, so that was kind of a memory of her time in Ireland. You know I have letters, I don’t know if you’d consider those keepsakes.

CH: Oh absolutely. Anything of interest particularly

UK: Well, one is a letter, I think I have it out in (word unintelligible?) but I can talk about it without looking at it. When my grandfather Roger was in the Philippines, he wrote a letter back home to his brother Mike in Great Falls describing what was going on and that letter was published in the Anaconda newspaper. Apparently it was a pretty major newspaper at its time so it was also distributed in Great Falls so that letter and we’ve got a copy, that’s literally ripped out of that page of the newspaper. So it was the actual newspapers printing of Roger’s letter. So that’s kind of neat to have.

CH: So we could include a photocopy of that in your provenance?

UK: Um-um.

CH: Okay, Very good. And so that was during the Spanish American war?

UK: Um.

CH: All right, how about photo albums, scrap books home movies? What kind of memorabilia do you have handed down?
UK: I do. I have a picture of Roger Curry in his, I guess you’d say, soldier’s uniform before he
goes to war, he’s like 18 years old. I have a couple of them right here. I have a picture of the
Cahalan Brothers Harp Orchestra and then a picture of their sisters there with their instruments
because they sometimes added in. Those are two or three that I think are pretty neat. I also
have a picture of my grandfather Roger Curry in his fireman’s cap and then there’s one of my
grandmother Curry, I don’t know how old she is she has white hair but it is the only kind of
professional picture we have of her. So that is kind of a keepsake for us. And then one photo of
the Curry siblings, so it’s my mom with her four sisters and brother when she, she looks like she
might be 8 or 10 years old.

CH: Were all of the Curry siblings born in the U.S.?

UK: Yes.

CH: Then maybe we can include some of those pictures in your file too, copies.

UK: Yes.

CH: Great. Okay. Have you or any members of your family traveled to Ireland?

UK: Yes. In ’06, I went to Ireland with eight of my cousins. (Laughs)

CH: Talk about that a little bit.

UK: Yeah. We had a great time. We actually went in three different groups and eventually got
together.

CH: Was Jim Gillespie one of those cousins?

UK: Yes.

CH: Okay
UK: He and his wife and his son Bill went; they flew to England and then came to Belfast. Um, Sheila, Nancy and I, buddies from way back, flew into Shannon and we came from a different direction and Brian Flaherty and his brother Tim Flaherty also flew in, but they came several days later and they flew into Shannon. When, Nancy and Sheila asked me to go with them they asked me what I wanted to do and I said the one thing I want to do was find the McKennas. I said I don’t care what else we go see; you pick the rest of the trip. We were going to be there for two weeks and I said but I want to see if I could find the McKennas and we kind of figured out where Ballyholan was and I had done enough research I thought that I could maybe find them and they agreed. And you know you had to drive on the wrong side of the road and sit on the wrong side. They both drove. I didn’t do any but we had to drive clear up, through the northern part of Ireland over into Tyrone and we stopped at this little inn, and bed and breakfast. We were going to try to stay in a little town called Cloher (spelling?), and there was no room there so we went on to a place called Anacloy (spelling?). And lucky for us we walked to the door and the landlady said “Are you doing family research?” and we said “Yes.” And she said: “Okay, here is the man to call.” I think his name was Jack Johnston. So, I called him up that night and said I’m looking for McKenna family and he says “Everybody here is McKenna, I haven’t researched it, I can’t help you”. I said, “Well, I’ve got the names of my grandmother’s married daughters who stayed here in Ireland. If I give you those names?” So I did and he had researched one of those families. He said: “I’ll call you back.” Next morning we were going to head out to church; it was Sunday, and we thought we’d go to the parish and ask the priest and as we were going out the door we got a call from this Jack Johnston who said: “I think you are Elish-McKennisas and you really should be able to find old Charley and this is where that farm is”
and he talked. But we don’t know where this all is that he’s telling us and I’m writing it all down.

So we head off to church and the church is out in the middle of the country and it’s got graveyards all around but there’s no town. So after mass we went to the priest and I said: “Can you tell us where our McKenna relatives are?” And he said: “No, why are you Americans coming here. We’re all McKennas”. And I said: “We’re Elish McKennas. “Oh”, he says, “Yes, they lived blah-blah-blah. Follow me.” And so, we followed him and he just pointed and drove off. So we had to walk up to the door and knock on it and say, you know, it’s a Sunday morning, and we’ve not called ahead, nothing. And the lady brought us in, beautiful you know, nice home, sat us down, she said her husband would be right in and so we sat there and waited. She was very polite. And this guy walks in. He’s a, you know Irish tend to be short; this is a guy over 6 feet, and I meant to tell you that when my grandmother Minnie came, she was, this is a physical characteristic I forgot to mention, she was like 5’10”; her brother Jim who came with her was 6’5”. So Minnie was half a head taller than her husband. I’ll show you a picture; he would never stand beside her because he didn’t want to look so short. But anyway this big 6 footer walks in. He crosses his arms like this and he says: “What do you want?” He didn’t want anything to do with Americans. So I began telling him the history what I knew. And I said: “You know Frank and Cathy lived on this farm. And in the 1910 census it looks like their son Patrick took over and his first son was Joe Patrick no his first son was Patrick Joseph”. And the guy said: “That’s my father”. And he sat down. Friendly, bring out the cookies, the drinks, he was fine with it. The old house was still there, the house that my grandmother grew up in. He said “Go ahead, take pictures. So we did that. Then he gave us the name to go on to the next relative who happened to be the graveyard groundskeeper at the church we’d been to but he took us and showed us,

Una Koontz Interview, OH 435-011, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
you know there were all kinds of McKenna graves. He knew which ones were our family and told us stories and showed us the graves. He sent us down the road. This time we met another one of his cousins but her father was still living; he would be a first cousin to my mother so we got to meet him. He’s in his 80’s, a little white-haired fellow, came up to about my ear and so we got to spend the Sunday afternoon visiting with him and his daughter. And then we had to leave. The next day we went and met Jim and Amy and their son up in northern Tyrone. I don’t remember the name of the town. That’s where Catherine Rafferty grew up and some Raffertys from Belfast came over, four siblings, and they showed us the home where our great grandmother Catherine Rafferty grew up. That was amazing. Yeah, so we hung around and took pictures. And from there we headed off and met another Rafferty relative then there was a big Gillespie reunion, for Jim and Amy so that was several days at the reunion. From there we went into Mayo. Sheila and Brian wanted to visit the Flaherty Castle. We did that and then we went to visit the Curry relatives in Irishtown and they took us to see the house where my grandfather Roger grew up. So in one trip saw those three homes so, and by that time it was time to get back and hop on the plane and leave. So that was amazing. You know we didn’t so much to see the sights as we met family and saw those historic homes where they grew up. So that was amazing.

CH: Wonderful. So glad you got to do that.

UK: Um hum.

CH: Okay. You talked quite a bit about the music in your family growing up and we’ll see some pictures of that band that they traveled with. How about funerals? Did you ever participate in
particular rites or were there wakes in your family? How was a death handled in your Irish family?

UK: Well, I would say we’d would always say the rosary the night before and the next day would be mass, go out to the graveyard and then we’d head to somebody’s home, and it would be hours. You know, there was always drink involved, lots of food involved and we just hung out until the wee hours you know.

CH: Celebrating that person’s life and your lives together?

UK: Yes, yes.

CH: Okay. Are there any particular Irish traditions that you learned that you particularly associate, with your Irish heritage besides your piano playing, that you brought from your mother or are there any other things that you would attribute to your Irish heritage?

UK: I’m not sure if it’s Irish or not but I know you know my Winnie-Cahalan Koontz grandmother did all the handwork, needlecraft, tatting and she did want to, she was not feeling well but she came over one afternoon and was very insistent to teach me how to tat with two colors. You know, I’d learned how to tat with one and it was time to learn how to tat with two. So I think that that’s the one.

CH: The tradition that she wanted to pass on, to stay behind her. All right, very nice. Let’s see.

(Pause) Let’s move on to great moments of sorrow or joy. And if you were to write the history of the Irish in Montana what would you include for future generations? What would you like to tell your nieces, nephews in future generations about your wonderful family you grew up with and your Irish heritage?

UK: Now you said something about great sorrow?

Una Koontz Interview, OH 435-011, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
CH: Either sorrow or joys, either, whatever, that prominent memory might be for you that you would share?

UK: Okay. Well I guess the sorrow was the part that was leaping out because of some incidents, and I have some newspaper articles here. I’ll just briefly mention about them.

CH: Talk about that. Sure

UK: Well, some of these I knew about from my mom and some I found out about later. I went into the police station once for something I needed to report and I was standing there waiting and at the top of the list of police killed in the line of action was Luke Curry and I thought “Humph” so I did research into it and this was—

CH: Was this here in Great Falls?

UK: Yes. And what I found out was this was a policeman killed about 1898. This was a Luke Curry that was a, I’m not sure he was related but I think he was. He seemed to have traveled with Roger’s brother Michael, the two of them seemed to have come from Ireland together, married together, in San Francisco, moved to Fort Benton together, came to Great Falls. Not too many years after, Luke was shot and killed, leaving behind five children. Those children kind of became cousins to my mom. You know they were, mom would say: “They’re cousins, I’m not quite sure how they’re related but”. And you know their dad died, so that was the tragedy. The other tragedy my mom told me about happened in 1924. Michael again, it was his friend, Luke who was shot and killed and his son William was shot and killed. He was walking home, he was like 25.

CH: Was this was in Great Falls also?
UK: This was in Great Falls. The Michael Curry family home was 909 4th Ave. North, and it stayed the family home for many, many years, you know like a son took over and lived there too so William was walking with his young wife, carrying their two year old child, walking up the street and there’s a convent on the corner and so he was in front of the convent. And a young fellow came up and he searched all his pockets and you know, he was holding his two-year-old, and wasn’t, you know, and just told him to leave him alone and the fellow shot him in the heart. And Walter, one of William’s brothers, came out got him into a passenger car, somebody driving by, but he died, when they got to the hospital. Um, and I think that same year, I think this really affected the family, it was a family of six brothers and one sister and Roger’s family was five girls and one boy so they were kind of were opposites, didn’t necessarily blend together because, you know. But that same year, Walter, the brother that took him to the hospital, he was the first one to move out of Great Falls, moved to Billings. And then Luke J., Michael’s brother, moved back to New York. He like, took his family and left. So there was some breaking apart of the Curry family at that point. And for Michael a few years after that, I was doing research and noticed that his wife Ellen was listing herself as a widow and Michael was not dead. He didn’t die until years later. So I began researching, and well where is Michael? He was still in town. He was living in a different boarding place every year, different job every couple of years, I have no proof but I think he lost his best friend to a shooting, he lost his son and I think he became an alcoholic then and abandoned the family. So I think that was a great tragedy in that family. They didn’t speak about it much but there were some real hard feelings. I have a letter that was written from a brother William in California. He sent 100 dollars to have a tombstone for Michael and he’s angry that it’s not being done so the family didn’t even want
to put a tombstone on Michael’s grave. So I think that was a real, you know, those two deaths and Michael somehow not having any. I would say that was a real tragedy. And the family started breaking apart.

CH: Is Michael’s grave recognized today?

UK: Yes, I went to take a look and it does have a gravestone on it. (laughs).

CH: You wouldn’t happen to have a picture of it would you?

UK: I do.

CH: Great. I’d like to have a picture of that to include in your archive also

UK: Okay, great.

CH: I think that’s very interesting. And great joys? Any great joys?

UK: Well, I think children were a great joy. Um, my uncle, Bill Kelly operated a camera. I have movie film of me going back to a year and a half. So all the Christmases, he was focusing on all the kids. And you can tell, it’s a very you know, all the adults are sitting on the edge of the room, the middle of the room is full of the little kids opening packages, and Santa comes, and it just seemed like it was a Christmas celebration but I think they very much sat back and enjoyed their children and it was a very, I was, recently, Nancy sent me a new DVD that goes through from between 1946 to 1948 and you can just see the happiness our parents, are in their 30’s, and um you know.

CH: I’m glad to see that you have digitally re-recorded those movie because we could perhaps include a copy of that in your packet about the information about your family. It would be wonderful to have those.

UK: Um hum, okay. You bet.
CH: All right, well that kind of wraps up the information from the biographical section. Is there anything else that you would like to share today or add to our profile?

UK: You know I would like to say a little bit more about Roger Curry.

CH: Please do.

UK: Um, just because he seemed to be a very talented man of all trades. They bought a home at 1550 on 4th Ave. North, and he just kept remodeling and remodeling for it to fit the family. He turned the pantry into a bedroom when John was unable to go up and down the stairs and so made a bedroom for him.

CH: Was John a child of his?

UK: Yes, John was his son, the one that had rheumatoid arthritis and it left him crippled. And the girls tended to stay at home until they married and some never got married until they were almost 30. So, I think you know they were struggling for money, I think they did a lot of, trying to figure out how to help John, spent a lot of money there, so eventually, he turned the upstairs into an apartment, put in a bathroom and a kitchen. And then, Nancy Kelly was recently telling me about he had to dig out in the basement. I don’t know why but her mother told her the story of Roger rolling wheelbarrows full of dirt out of the basement when he built the bedroom down there for the two younger girls who were still at home. He built the garage onto the house. The money they didn’t spend on John for college, they bought a 1935 Ford and John did learn to drive that and the Ford is still in our chicken house. (Laugh) We still have it out on the farm, I hate to say. And they still have it.

But a couple of stories about Roger. He kind had a sense of humor and this is a story about him that’s been told. They had inspection at the firehouse and so all the firemen had to get dressed
up in uniform and get all spiffied and stand in line, and the inspector came and he’d go down the line and you know, ask the fellow his name and kind of check him out and then he’d point to something on the fire truck and say “And what’s that?” and ask its purpose. So, he’s coming down the line and he comes to Roger and points to something on the truck and says “Well, what’s the purpose of that?” and with a with a straight face Roger says “Well, sir, the sole purpose of that is to polish.” (Laughs). He probably didn’t know what it was but he came up with an answer straight faced. (Laughs)

CH: (Laughs) It was probably a piece of brass.

UK: And so, and another story about him my mom would tell. They would have people come and stay at the house you know, and so kids would have to give up their beds. And so she tells of the one time she went to her dad and said “Well, I’ll sleep in the bathtub”. And he asked her: “Are you sure you want to do that?” And she said, “Yeah” ’so he let her, you know just kind of. So he checked it out and wanted to make sure so at bedtime she took her pillow and blanket and hopped in the bathtub. And so the next morning s of course she said was stiff and sore (laughs) and she went to her dad and said “I don’t want to sleep in the bathtub anymore” (laughs). And he said: “I didn’t think so”. (Laughs) Anyhow he just let her, he didn’t insist, No No, he just let her so kind of a, kind gentle man. But one other story is that he couldn’t milk the milk cow, the milk cow wouldn’t let him. I don’t know if he was too rough or what so Minnie always had to. I don’t know if he just didn’t want to or what. But anyway he had a sense of humor and seemed very kind and gentle with his kids.

CH: You mentioned that you still have the 1935 Ford on the farm. Is the farm still in the family? And could you talk a little about that since you lived out there?
UK: Sure. It’s basically a wheat farm. We had a few cattle, not a lot, maybe like 25 it was an old farm house, built in like 1900’s, 1902 or something, so it also did not have indoor plumbing and mom said “I’m not moving out there till you put a bathroom in.” So my dad, who is kind of handy like his father-in-law, put in a bathroom with the help of his brother and I remember they had me stand there to figure out the height of the sink and I was just a kid so the sink is still kind of low because I was just a little kid. But they put in a bathroom in the back hall, and we did have a milk cow for a while. My mom was a city girl. She said “I’m not having chickens this time”. You know she just said: “I’m not going to do the whole farm thing this time. I want indoor plumbing” and she said “I gave up a nice home in Great Falls and you’ve got to put in a bathroom and make it a few concessions here.” They seemed to do very well out there. And my dad’s brother had a farm nearby so that kind of put us closer to his family.

CH: Do members of your family still own the farm today?

UK: I own it with my brothers. It’s just in the CRP, you know Crop Reduction Program. My younger brother and I have a garden out there though, so we head out there so I still head out there and take care of the garden. So we keep it up; it’s not just empty. And my, then brother, my older brother Roger, lives in Colorado so if he comes up there to stay, he stays out there.

CH: So the house is still there?

UK: Um hum.

CH: Great. Wonderful. Well it’s been a delight visiting with you today. Is there any other things you’d like to mention, about your family and your Irish heritage?

UK: I think we got most of that in with your questions. Thank you. It was great.

CH: All right. Thank you Una.