

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

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.

Oral History Number: 435-050

Interviewee: Brian Murphy

Interviewer: Sandra Williamson

Date of Interview: March 14, 2011

Project: The Gathering – Collected Oral Histories of the Irish in Montana

Sandra Williamson: Okay. We are here today on March 14, 2011 to interview Brian Murphy at [address restricted] in Missoula, Montana. Welcome.

Brian Murphy: Thank you.

SW: So, I guess were just gonna kind of start off with a little bit about you, and umm If you could clearly state your name.

BM: Brian Michael William Murphy.

SW: [laughs] and where and when were you born?

BM: I was born in Billings, Montana, [full birth date restricted] 1982.

SW: So we touched a little bit on this when we did the pre- interview, but where have you lived? Have you lived in a lot of different places?

BM: No, I was born in Billings and grew up there after I finished High school I went to the University of Notre Dame for my undergraduate education after I graduated I moved to Bozeman, Montana and I lived in Bozeman and Yellowstone Park for about two years and then I moved to Missoula.

SW: Okay, and you moved here to go to a law school?

BM: I did.

SW: Okay. Let's see, and so are you a lawyer now or law clerk or what do you do?

BM: Yes I'm a lawyer and a law clerk for Judge Malloy. He's a Federal District Judge here in Montana.

SW: Okay, and...Are you married?

BM: I am married to a wonderful woman

SW: [laughs] At what age did you marry?

BM: I married several...four months ago almost to the day.

SW: Congratulations.

BM: So in 2010.

SW: Ok and is your wife of Irish ancestry also?

BM: I believe she does have some Irish blood in her somewhere, I don't know the exact make up though.

SW: Okay, so I'm just gonna ask you a little bit of family folklore, and just tell me what you know and don't worry about it if you don't know it.

BM: Okay.

SW: When did your ancestors leave Ireland?

BM: I don't know the exact dates. I could probably get those dates because I think my father has done some genealogical research. I know that there's some Irish on my mother's side as well and she has information on that as well, I know that my father his parents his father was ahh all Irish. His name was Michael Anthony Murphy. He was born in Anaconda Montana His parents; I believe are the ones that immigrated to Montana. They grew up in county Kerry in Ireland and apparently they grew up within a mile of each other. I'm not sure whether they met in Montana or in Ireland, but I have been told or I think people suspect they met actually in Anaconda.

SW: Interesting, very interesting. So do you know anything about their lives in Ireland, maybe what they did there or other than?

BM: I don't, I think that I had family go back and find a family farm so I suspect that they farmed but I don't know the answer to that.

SW: What does your Irish ancestry mean to you?

BM: I would say...My ancestry is part of me. I feel that it connected It's a way that I can connect with my parents and their parents and ancestors. I think that a big part as I was thinking about what Irish influence do I have in my life, I grew up Roman Catholic and I that influenced my life pretty significantly so I would say that influence is important as well.

SW: Do you know any stories about how your family first came to the United States? You say that you know they were in Ireland and then they were in Anaconda. Do you know the story of how they came to be here or when kind of roughly when was it during the Famine or?

BM: I don't know the answer to that.

SW: You don't. That's okay. So did they settle in Anaconda to work for the Anaconda Company?

BM: I suspect that is the case I don't actually recall if my father has told me or not. I assumed that he was involved in some respect to smelting. I know my dad's dad ended up being I think it was a government worker a bureaucrat. And I'm not sure on my dad's mom's side. My dad's mom's side they were Cooney, and her parents were Irish and German.

SW: Did your family stay in Anaconda or did they move around?

BM: Ultimately, well my dad was born in Helena and grew up in Helena I don't know if I have [laughs] ancestors in Anaconda but my dad's immediate family there still someone. He has a sister in Helena then a brother in Spokane and a sister in Roseburg Oregon.

SW: So what do you know about your family name?

BM: I know there a lot of folks named Murphy. [laughs]

SW: So you don't know any stories about the history or origin of that name or if it's undergone any changes at all through out kind of, in its travelling over here and to Helena?

BM: I don't know.

SW: No. Okay, so we'll move on. Are there any traditional first names or nicknames in your family?

BM: My grandfather on my father's side was named Iron Mike. I think he got that name because he got in a lot of fights. I think he was known as a fighter he was a tough guy apparently.

SW: and so his name was Michael which—

BM: Michael, which is my middle name, yes.

SW: Yes, okay. So are there naming traditions? I know that you have his name as a middle name. Is that...does your father carry that name too?

BM: I think that my father has a name because it's either the Patron Saint of mothers or something its either Gregory or Gerard, my dad is Greg. She had him at a very late age and that is why they chose that name. I don't know uhh I think my parents picked Irish names for all their children. My older sister's name is Meagan and she married actually a guy who has ancestors and relatives in the Butte Anaconda area she is married to Ryan Kenny and uhh I think when speaking to Ryan's Grandfather who recently passed away, he actually knew uhh Iron Mike, and I don't remember what Ryan's grandfathers name nick name was but uhh he had some nickname too and they all knew each other by these names.

SW: What are some of your childhood memories of Helena?

BM: I grew up in Billings, and we did go back to Helena...You want me to—

SW: Oh, Billings then, yes.

[Knock on door; break in audio]

SW: So we'll just start again with your name.

BM: My name is Brian Michael William Murphy.

SW: And you are...You were born in Billings?

BM: Yes.

SW: And raised in Billings? So were going to talk a little bit about. What are some of your childhood memories of Billings?

BM: I had a great childhood. I suppose I took part in normal childhood things I was very involved in academics, sports, music. I'm not sure exactly what you're looking for.

SW: So you played sports? What did you play?

BM: I did. I played Little League Baseball, played football in school and lots of pick up sports was real involved in music. My parents were musicians and my older sister started playing violin at age three she is now a professional musician on the East Coast. Really fine. I started playing violin my younger sister Allison also plays a violin.

SW: So your parents were both musicians- What did they play?

BM: They both played French horn and uhh my mom played other instruments growing up, piano and flute and

SW: So music was a big part of your growing up and experience as a child, there was a lot of music?

BM: It was yes, yes, a lot of violin lessons and I competed in concerto competitions and went to study music in undergraduate school.

SW: Wow, and then you became a lawyer.

BM: [laughs] And then I became a lawyer.

SW: Now you came and played *An Raibh Tú Ar in Gcarrig* for our class and I love that song. Tell me a little bit about...Do you like playing Irish music? Is that an interest that you have now that has developed?

BM: I do. I was classically trained so I spent most of the time growing up playing strict classical regiment learning etudes and concertos. When I was a senior in high school I really wanted a mandolin. I convinced my parents to get me a cheap mandolin. That was a neat instrument to me to play because it was an easier to play than the fiddle and I didn't have as much invested in it so I felt less self-confident playing it in front of other folks, and a lot of the music that I played was Irish-Irish tunes and blue grass and

SW: Did you teach yourself?

BM: Yes, the mandolin is very similar to violin and so I did just teach myself but I did study privately with the violin. And so now actually, I would say I play now more just for fun with other friends. So the majority of the music I play is probably Irish bluegrass or folk.

SW: What was it do you think that drew you to that music? Was it just because of the kind of instruments you were playing kind of lent themselves to that kind of music or were you drawn to that kind of music to bluegrass and Irish?

BM: I think that's true that certainly those instruments lend themselves to that music. The music is attractive and it's a fun music to listen to and it is relatively easy to play. I would say that part of my Irish heritage impacts me wanting to play that music as well.

SW: So what kind of education did you have? Did you go to public school did you?

BM: I went to public school then went to private university then I went to state school I went law school here.

SW: Where did you go to private University?

BM: I went to the University of Notre Dame.

SW: Why did you choose Notre Dame?

BW: I guess I grew...My father went to law school there actually so I grew up a Notre Dame fan. I guess a Notre Dame football fan. I'd had gone back to the school a number of times. When I was looking at schools I sent applications to a number of different places. I think the quality of education, the schools reputation for being good academically. The Catholic component of the school went into my decision. It just felt like a good fit at the time when I was making that decision.

SW: What was it like in your home you say you have two sisters were you fairly close in age? Were all hooligans together?

BM: Yes I'm the middle child. My older sister Meagan is two years older than I. She's 30 now. I'm 28, and my younger sister is 24. So Meagan and I were very close growing up and uh when she was in high school I spent a lot of time actually hanging out with her and her friends—good folks. Then when Meagan went to school...I always had a pretty close relationship with Ally to but those four years or so with just Ally I grew very close to her. I very close to both my sisters. I get along very well with both of them.

SW: Was going to church a big part of that? Did you guys attend church regularly as children?

BM: We did always growing up—Sunday mass. My mother was not Catholic. She became Catholic when she married my dad after some time. Then she became very Catholic I would say to the point that she would participate in the Eucharistic Adoration every Friday. Occasionally go to daily mass and the rosary was something that was said in our home.

SW: So there was a real strong spiritual connection between family and church?

BM: Yes, I would say that was accurate.

SW: So was the neighborhood you grew up in...Did you grow up on a farm? Did you grow up in an urban neighborhood? What was that like for you?

BM: I grew up in just a neighborhood that was in a little cul-de-sac until the sixth grade that was right next to the school and then at that point we moved further west and we had a house that

was close to the rims. It was great there were all kinds of mountain bike trails and lots of places for a little kid to play so.

SW: So what was the community of Billings like when you were growing up? Was it different than it is now or can you reflect on that a bit?

BM: I was just talking to a friend of mine who was working in Billings this year and he indicated to me that he got an impression that Billings was a pretty young town. I never had the impression that it was a college town like Missoula or Bozeman was. I would say if you are talking about change I think it's becoming more of a lively town and a supportive community. I think they have one of the best farmers markets in the state. There's a lot of great music opportunities there, a lot of good live music there. There is access to the outdoors so my friends and I spent a lot of time backpacking, biking fishing. They have a good public school system there. I feel like I got a good education. It's a city that you have to drive more. Since I've lived in Missoula and Bozeman it's easier to get around by foot.

SW: Does your family have any special sayings or expressions?

BM: I'm sure we've got lots of them, the only thing that's coming to mind now is, "Life is what you make it so make the best of it." I don't where that's coming from.

SW: Do you remember...Are your grandparents still living?

BM: I never knew my grandparents on my father's side. My mother's mother is alive, and my grandfather died in 2007.

SW: So how do you traditionally celebrate holidays in your family? What are some of the traditions that you have?

BM: I suppose sharing food is definitely a part of that. We get together and celebrate birthdays, Christmas, Easter I guess all the major holidays growing up and now the family is only able to get back together mainly for around Christmas time.

SW: And what about your father? How many siblings did he have? Did he have a lot of siblings?

BM: He did. He had an older brother and an older sister, and they're quite far apart in age. I think, like 16 years. And then he has a younger sister.

SW: Did your families get together and celebrate holidays together, or was it just typically your family unit?

BM: It just depended. My aunt who lived in Helena—we frequently got together with Coleen and her kids. We would get together for, I suppose, just momentous events, I guess, like weddings and stuff with my other family or just get together not to celebrate a particular holiday or any thing but just to say hi.

SW: Just to say hi. Are there any special foods or songs? Do you guys get together and play music on the holidays?

BM: We do, and I've been trying to get our family to do more of that lately. Both my sisters play violin and there is not a whole lot of music written for violin. I think also growing up in a classical setting where you prepare a piece until it's perfect and you don't play in front of people until it's perfect that's impacted a little bit us playing. But within the last five or six years I've been trying to convince my younger sister to play the banjo or Meagan is a really good fiddle player and plays a little bass guitar. We'll try get together and make music. We always have a caroling party at our house around Christmas. Yes, so I would say that it is a part of what we do when we get together, but I'm hoping it will be even more something we do in the future.

SW: What family heirlooms, keepsakes or mementos do you have?

BM: That I own? I don't know. Can you think of any thing?

[Speaks to his wife.] Yes, I guess I do I have a set of dishes from my parents. In terms of Irish stuff, I don't think that there is any of that.

SW: Oh, that's okay, it doesn't have to be just that. Let's see...Are there memories that you have connected with those dishes? Do you remember those dishes?

BM: I do remember them growing up, yes. They were dishes that my mom wasn't using anymore. They were great set of dishes.

[Speaks to his wife]

Oh yes, that's something [laughs] There is one plate that we have. So this is the design of all the plate and we have one plate that says you are special today. That was one time a week one of the kids or parents would be chosen as that person and they would get to choose what was for dinner and what the activities were for the night.

SW: That's wonderful, that really is. Do you have any photo albums or scrapbooks, home movies or any of that stuff?

BM: My parents have most of those. There is a large collection of VHS and they did a good job of preparing photo journals.

SW: That's of you guys growing up and your extended family and such?

BM: Trips and—

SW: So what do you remember about your trips? Did you guys take trips within the state or did you travel outside of the country?

BM: We traveled throughout the state, we visited relatives in Oregon. We did travel out of the country some. We went to spend a little over a week in Ireland. One time actually that was a special trip my family went over.

SW: What was that like?

BM: It was fantastic. The way I've described it to people you have a picture of a place in your mind, before you go there, and often times it's not exactly what I anticipated not that it's better or worse. But I had a picture of Ireland in my mind when I went over there; we were in the west, southwestern part of Ireland. I was just exactly how I imagined it. It was incredibly green with all sorts of rock walls and old men walking down winding streets. It was very picturesque. It was a perfect vacation.

SW: How old were you at that time?

BM: I was in the spring break of my first year of undergraduate school. I was like 19 or 20.

SW: That was a good time to go.

BM: Yes.

SW: Yes. So you started playing violin, and I know was that something that your parents kind of presented you with the violin and said, "Here you're going to play the violin," or was it something you decided you would like to do?

BM: I think it's something I decided that I would like to do. My dad had a friend in the symphony. My dad played French horn in the Billings symphony, and he had a friend who was the principle violist. She had a son who was my older sister's age and he was starting violin at age three. Because Austin was playing, Meagan wanted to play and my parents thought, "We'll start her out on the stringed instrument now, and when she's old enough to play a real instrument like the French horn. Then she can switch over." She started playing the fiddle and because Meagan was playing I wanted to play and then because I was playing my younger sister wanted to play. We have all the different sized fiddles growing up so we just hand them down

as one person would get older they would get the next largest fiddle. We probably have four or five fiddles back at the house.

SW: So you were quite young then too?

BM: I started at five, age five, and took private lessons all the way through up I guess through my undergraduate education so.

SW: Are there any superstitions in your family or are you superstitious at all?

BM: We may have some superstitions. I can't think of any off the top of my head.

SW: Okay, that's all right. So what are the most striking changes in your life so far, your greatest moments of sorrow and joy?

BM: Oh I'd have to say my greatest moment of joy would have to be marrying my wife in November, this last November. I have been blessed with a good life. I've had lots of positive things happen. I haven't had any real tragedies happen to me in my life.

[Speaks to his wife]

My wife is saying we're thinking of buying a farm out in the Bitterroot valley. We're not sure if it's going to happen but that's an exciting part of our lives.

SW: Yes, it is. And is it an old farm house or?

BM: It's a small place it has six or seven acres there's a couple structures on the place, and the people who owned it last, had...ran an organic garden and there's 30 fruit trees.

SW: Oh wow. And where is that at in the Bitterroot?

BM: It's on the east side...It's between Florence and Stevensville. It's fairly unlikely that we'll end up there. But it's our dream right now.

SW: Oh it'd be nice, yes. My sister and brother in law have an organic apple orchard in that same area and they have an earthship home.

BM: Oh really? That's nice.

SW: They're happy there so I could see you being happy there as well. So Brian I was wondering if you wouldn't mind playing your fiddle for us today?

BM: Sure, I think that I could play. [Brian's wife says tell them your dogs names] Oh yes this is something our dog is a Kerry Blue Terrier which is the national dog of Ireland and his name is Guinness and then we also have a labradoodle...No, he's not. He's a golden doodle, named Gilligan. Great dogs, lots of character.

SW: Can I ask you how did you get involved in coming in and playing for our Irish music class? How did you end up coming in there?

BM: Oh a wonderful man, Traolach O' Riordáin, ended up meeting him and he was putting together this class that studied Irish music. He was bringing in various artists to demonstrate Irish music and techniques he asked if I'd want to come in and play and meet James Kelly who is a famous fiddle player and I said, "Oh, I'd be thrilled to," so he invited me to come in and I just did a short demonstration.

SW: So did you know of James Kelly before this had you heard him play before?

BM: I had heard him play a little bit, but I hadn't follow his career extensively but I knew he and his father were known as Irish fiddlers.

SW: So did you go to the concert when he was here?

BM: I did go to the concert?

SW: And what is that like for you being classically trained, to sit and listen to somebody playing that has just kind of learned by ear? Is it different do you hear differences?

BM: Oh sure absolutely there is differences. Some techniques it was interesting, I actually got to go play with James and some other musicians around town after the concert. We just sat in a little session and played at someone's house. It was more of a traditional setting and the type of playing when you're playing with other musicians their all playing the same thing. There is not as much focus on the solo instruments or the tone. You create a big tone by having a lot of musicians most of the time and so classical music you spend a lot of time learning how to create a large tone. Especially a lot of the music I studied was for concerto, music for solo violinist so you spend a lot of time learning to create a lot of noise out of your instrument and make it really beautiful. There's less of that I suppose in Irish music. So the technique is different. He uses very short bits of the bow. I'm interested in actually learning more about traditional techniques of playing.

SW: I was curious, I know you went in and sat in on the session. I've sat in on bluegrass sessions and maybe someone will take a lead and play. Is it the same in an Irish session?

BM: It's different. There's not as much...I think there are some places where that has become part of the tradition but I think traditionally that's not the case, everyone is playing the same

thing and there is not as much focus on the solo so there are six violins and they are not taking turns showing off they

SW: So you are all playing the same thing? Or do you listen for-do you play a harmony while somebody is taking out the lead?

BM: My understanding is in terms of tradition is that you would play the same thing, but you may add different frills or ornaments on, so that would add something different on. Or you may do a little harmony but umm there that's not a big of a...There is certainly harmony made when you get the mandolin

SW: The concerto [concertina] and guitar. I thought it was interesting one of the things he said [James Kelly] you got to ask yourself how much crunch do you want in your sound. Do you go for that crunch too in your sound- 'Cause I don't think that's probably part of your classical training, or maybe it is, I don't know.

BM: Yes, well classical music is so bombast there are so many different sounds and techniques that you are asked to create in different compositions. But I would say the majority of the stuff you're trying to create a nice smooth and not scratchy tone.

SW: So do you like creating that scratch or is that something that you have to kind of get used to?

BM: I would have to say that generally when I'm playing Irish tunes I don't try for a lot of crunch or scratch. [laughs] but maybe I'll listen for places that it's more appropriate and try and incorporate it in more.

SW: and have you ever played O' Carolins tunes? When he [Kelly] played those—O'Carolins dream—do you know who wrote that?

BM: I don't.

SW: I can't remember who did that- It was just a beautiful song, and I was wondering if maybe you've tried any of those tunes or not?

BM: I may have played them I don't know.

SW: Okay, well, I would love it if you could bless us with some of your playing now.

BM: Yes. I may have to warm up a bit.

SW: That's just fine.

BM: [Plays violin] All right, I'll give it a shot here hang on.

SW: So where did you learn *An raibh tú ar in Gcarrig*?

BM: I heard it...Actually I was looking for Irish tunes to play at my wedding because I was trying to organize music for that. I think it was searching around on the internet for tunes, and thought that's a really neat song and I did an arrangement for the tin whistle. I play tin whistle so I had that at my wedding.

SW: Oh, and the story behind that is really interesting as well. You touched a little bit about that in class about the fact that it's a code song.

BM: Right my understanding is that...I forgot we were still recording here. [laughs] My understanding is that the...yes, it was a code song. It's a love song and the lyrics are in Irish are, "Were you at the rock? Yes, I was at the rock. Did you see my love there? Yes she was gorgeous." Depending on the last word would indicate to individuals whether it was safe to go to mass or not. The rock was mass. This at a time when Irish Catholics were persecuted.

SW: Yes, that's quite a beautiful song. And interesting how they found a way around it, you know. We'll get there.

BM: You want to play that one too?

SW: Yes if you think you can. You don't have to, no pressure. Maybe you'll play the tin whistle for us tonight too.

BM: [Laughs] and mandolin, guitar.

SW: [laughs] Yes you'll do a concert for us tonight. Whenever you're ready, Brandon.

So what will you be playing for us tonight?

BM: I guess maybe I'll string two songs together, "Were You at the Rock" and "Drowsy Maggie".

SW: Are you ready?

BM: [Plays violin]

SW: Beautiful, just beautiful. I thought of something while you playing. I know you went to Notre Dame, and you did study some music there. It's no secret that that is a pretty Irish community. Did you run into other musicians that you played Irish music with or?

BM: I did. Actually, it's an interesting story. I went with the Notre Dame orchestra and played on St. Patty's Day actually at Carnegie Hall with the Chieftains. So that was a great experience.

SW: What a thrill.

BM: I played in a bluegrass band, Wild Bill's Blue Grass Brigade. We played Irish tunes sometimes at house parties sometimes for Irish events on campus. I played mandolin with them.

SW: And when you played with the Chieftains on St. Patty's Day at Carnegie Hall, was that with a group through the University of Notre Dame?

BM: Yes, it was.

SW: And what did you play? Traditional Irish tunes or what?

BM: We did a lot of accompaniment stuff for them. I think there was a piece that was arranged for a symphony orchestra and incorporated classical music and traditional Irish music together.

SW: What a thrill that probably was?

BM: It was a huge thrill.

SW: Brian, I wonder if you would play the tin whistle for us now?

BM: Good lord, it's been a while. This is a new instrument for me so.

SW: Did you teach yourself to play?

BM: Yes about six months, oh, maybe a little longer than that. I bought it with my birthday money. I obsessed with instruments. [Laughs]

SW: My son has a room full of instruments that he has left at my house. Every instrument you can imagine. He loves them. So what was it that piqued your interest in the tin whistle? Why did you want to learn to play that?

BM: I think also a fun instrument. I thought it would be quick to pickup and I thought it would be easy to take back packing or on other trips. Most of the music I play on it is Irish too

SW: Did you purchase that in town or did you have to order it?

BM: This is one that I ordered on line from a company. I don't know they actually...I think they are an American company.

SW: All right, what will you attempt to play for us tonight?

BM: I don't even know. I haven't played this thing in a while.

SW: You don't have to.

BM: I'll play a little something. I don't what it's called.

SW: That's okay.

BM: [Plays tin whistle] All right.

SW: Wonderful! So you played at your wedding.

BM: I did.

SW: What did you play?

BM: I played "Were You at the Rock". You want me to play that?

SW: Sure if you want to.

BM: Oh that's okay.

SW: [Laughs] A little rusty. All right. Thank you so much.

BM: Oh, you're welcome.

SW: Wonderful, wonderful. So now do you ever see yourself going back to Ireland and maybe sitting in on a session?

BM: Oh, I'd love to.

SW: Okay, well, I think that is a wrap. Thank you so much for sitting with us.

BM: Oh, you're welcome.

[End of Interview]