

Josephine Grennan Oral History Interview –8/7/1966
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Biographical Note

Grennan, an Irish cousin of President Kennedy discusses President Kennedy's 1947 and 1963 visits to New Ross, Ireland including the preparations for the visit, President Kennedy's assassination, and tourism at the Kennedy homestead, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

With

MRS. JOSEPHINE GRENNAN

August 7, 1966
Dunganstown, Ireland

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Really about all I wanted to talk to you about was when did you first hear that John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] was coming over, and how did you hear? Who told you?

GRENNAN: I can't remember now. I think it was probably through the Embassy in Dublin, through the American Embassy. They came down here and told that he was coming. I had heard, like those rumors, of course, in the papers and everything, that he was coming. Then the official news came from the Embassy.

O'CONNOR: Of course he had been here before.

GRENNAN: He had been here in '47.

O'CONNOR: But I guess you didn't make any special preparations or anything like that for him when he was here in '47 because he wasn't...

GRENNAN: No, we didn't know he was coming. He just called during his stay in Lismore.

O'CONNOR: Well, did you make any special preparations? Were you very excited about his coming down here in 1963?

GRENNAN: We were all very excited, but we regarded his coming as a cousin coming home. Of course, we were delighted that he had the biggest position in your...

O'CONNOR: In the United States, yes.

GRENNAN: We thought of him as being just a cousin. We liked to meet him that way and receive him that way.

O'CONNOR: Probably a lot more relaxing for him, too, for you to meet him like that.

GRENNAN: Yes, yes. We always felt very at home with him from the time he stepped out of the car. It was just as if he had been here the couple of days before. You know, he just came in and... I was telling you about that picture. It was the very first thing he asked my uncle.

O'CONNOR: If he still had that picture?

GRENNAN: If he ever got the picture. Now that was fourteen years, or fifteen, and he still remembered.

O'CONNOR: That was the picture that he had taken himself of you and your mother [Mary Kennedy] and some other members of the family?

GRENNAN: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Yes, he had taken that in 1947. Well, who was here when he came? You were here and your mother was here. Was anybody else here when he came, when he arrived?

GRENNAN: In 1947?

O'CONNOR: No, in 1963.

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GRENNAN: Oh, in 1963. All the families, my uncle and his family, my aunt and her family. They were all Kennedys. Then a lot of other cousins and of course a lot of the neighbors and friends.

O'CONNOR: They'd come by to see the President. Well, what did you do? Where did he go?

GRENNAN: We had a party – what do you call it – a tea party in the front.

O’CONNOR: Where, in the kitchen area?

GRENNAN: In the yard. He came in here first and he met everyone and chatted for a while and had a cup of tea in the kitchen there with my mother. Then afterwards we went out to the yard there for the main party.

O’CONNOR: Who was there? Were there all relatives there or were just members of the family there?

GRENNAN: All relatives. The yard was packed. You know, all the security and things like that.

O’CONNOR: Oh yes.

GRENNAN: Everyone, neighbors and friends.

O’CONNOR: Had the security people visited you before he came here?

GRENNAN: The security were here for about a month.

O’CONNOR: Oh, they were. A month! What did they do? Did they make you change things or anything like that?

GRENNAN: They had to know everything that was to happen. You know, they really had the organizing of everything because they were the.... We hadn’t that much to worry about in that way because they were the main organizers of everything. It was their idea for us to have – well, I don’t know, it wasn’t the security but it must be the American Embassy – the yard party there.

[-3-]

O’CONNOR: Did they bother you much? Did they get in your road or anything, the security people?

GRENNAN: No, they didn’t, no.

O’CONNOR: Because we had heard some complaints from various people of security people coming, not to here necessarily, but to other places, and...

GRENNAN: We were never bothered very much. They were always very helpful. You know, it was better because we knew that everything was going to be okay then.

O'CONNOR: Well, what kind of a man did you think he was? What was your impression of him when he came? Was he what you expected or not what you expected?

GRENNAN: He was. He was even more homely. You know, being the President, I suppose you think that maybe he'd be a little more....

O'CONNOR: Standoffish, maybe.

GRENNAN: Yes, or more businesslike, but he was just a normal man coming in to.... It's just a....

O'CONNOR: Just a friend visiting.

GRENNAN: Just a cousin visiting.

O'CONNOR: Well, that's an interesting thing. But did the people, do you think, were they warm to him, did they welcome to him, or were they a little afraid or excited or something?

GRENNAN: Of course, before he came everyone was very tensed up 'til afterward. They didn't know who they were going to meet or what they were going to meet. But I think he made them all just draw at their ease. He came in. Here a lot of the neighbors that helped that day, they were in the kitchen and they weren't supposed to – they weren't on the official party. They were supposed to keep in the background and they had told some of the officials that they were to stay

[-4-]

away. But they were in the kitchen there and when he was going out they opened the door there. He went in and he chatted...

O'CONNOR: So he went in and met them.

GRENNAN: ...chatted away with them. Some of them were shaking hands with him, for instance, three times. And he talked to them about what way they helped and....

O'CONNOR: Well, did he talk to you then?

GRENNAN: Yes, well, we were talking to him, my mother of course.

O'CONNOR: Yes, I wish your mother were here today because I would have enjoyed hearing her talk about him, say what she thought of him, what he said to

her.

GRENNAN: Yes. Of course, everything was so crowded and the time was so short that there was very little time for any personal conversation and he knew this.

O'CONNOR: Oh, I'm sure of that. Did he remember any of the relatives that he met here before?

GRENNAN: Oh he did. He remembered very well now, and Uncle Jim [James Kennedy]. He called Uncle Jim by his name before he was even introduced to him.

O'CONNOR: Oh really?

GRENNAN: Then the first time he came, when he was inquiring the way he would come up the road and he met a man that directed him. You know, he asked him where it was – Kennedys' – and he directed him. He was standing there in the yard just before he came into the house here that day and my sister [Mary Ann Ryan] and myself were standing there and talking to him, and he wanted to know who was that man. We couldn't remember at that time.

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O'CONNOR: You hadn't found out yet.

GRENNAN: You know, we couldn't remember who he was talking about. He described him. He said he was a big man with a round face and he used a stick, and in a minute we knew who it was. It was our neighbor. But he remembered that much now; every little thing seemed to just stay there in his mind.

O'CONNOR: Well, what did the people say about him? What did you think about him after he left, and the neighbors that had met him?

GRENNAN: Praise wasn't, couldn't be enough. They were really thrilled. He really I think, impressed them more than they ever thought that he could. They never thought he was.... It was this homely way; I think that's what impressed them. He was receptive.

O'CONNOR: Not as you might expect a president to be.

GRENNAN: No, he wasn't president when he was here, I don't think. He was just a.... That's the way he wanted to be, I think. He wanted to be just one of ourselves.

O'CONNOR: After he left he went back to the United States, and it wasn't long after

that he was killed. Do you remember anything about that? When did you hear about that, or how did you hear about that?

GRENNAN: We were listening to a program on the radio and it was announced that he was shot at. We heard it just the same as it happened.

O'CONNOR: Was there much feeling here then when he....

GRENNAN: It was terrible. There was no one here. I mean, my mother and myself. It was really unbelievable.

[-6-]

O'CONNOR: I was told there was still a great deal of warm feeling toward him so that when he was killed then there was a great, great deal of sadness, a great deal of sympathy. Do you think that was so, or do you think the people here really were attached to him or not?

GRENNAN: We had callers here. My mother, now she got thousands of letters of sympathy. Now you'd think that it wouldn't be here, but people just tormented us. But everyone in Ireland, I think, as well as between here and America, and mass cards and letters of sympathy. And they even called here then. It was just really unforgettable, the sorrow and response here in Ireland. Everyone, the crowds that turned out to masses and churches – every religion. There was no difference.

O'CONNOR: How had it been since that time? I suppose your life had to have changed a little bit with so many people coming here and so forth.

GRENNAN: Yes, well, we had to meet a lot more people than normally.

O'CONNOR: Like me for example.

GRENNAN: Like you.

O'CONNOR: You know, I noticed as we pulled up here there was a carload of people waiting outside and looking around.

GRENNAN: Yes, there's carloads there from the early morning until late at night every day, especially during the tourist season. Every nationality, not Americans alone. I think every.... And everyone that comes, no matter what nationality, they all seem to have the same thing to say about him. He was a close – they all seem to say that it was like one of their own family that died when he died, even the little children.

[-7-]

O'CONNOR: That's funny that they would know and that they would be aware.

GRENNAN: Even the small children.... I was really amazed that they were there. You can know how it was; you think that it stuck so much in small children's minds.

O'CONNOR: Has it also been some bother to you here with a lot of people coming around?

GRENNAN: At first it was. We weren't expecting anything like that. It was hard to fit in our work with people calling. Now it's getting – we're kind of prepared to talk when they come.

O'CONNOR: To talk like we're talking right now.

GRENNAN: To talk.

O'CONNOR: Well, it was pretty nice that he came, though, to visit. I think that was a good thing to do.

GRENNAN: Oh yes, it was. He was to come back again. He said that he would.

O'CONNOR: Yes, that's right, he did. That was about the last thing he said too.

GRENNAN: It was.

O'CONNOR: He wanted to come back to Ireland.

GRENNAN: He said that he was coming back the year after, the next year, but we had a group from Boston here exactly a year after his visit. They said that when he went back that time he got in contact with this group and he wanted them to be here during his visit. They came. They didn't postpone their trip. They came and they brought a beautiful chalice, you know, for the church here. They said that he wanted them to come.

[-8-]

O'CONNOR: Did you meet any of his brothers at any time? Did you meet Robert Kennedy or Ted Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy]?

GRENNAN: No I didn't meet Robert Kennedy. My sister met Robert.

O'CONNOR: When was that?

GRENNAN: At the funeral.

O'CONNOR: Your sister went over.

GRENNAN: And she again met him last year. She was in America last year.

O'CONNOR: She went all the way back. She went to the United States for the funeral.

GRENNAN: She did, yes. She was in the White House that evening with the family. Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] gave her a rosary that he had on him, and she also gave his, one of his tags, the dog tag that he had. He had two of them, I think, and she sent one of them home to my mother.

O'CONNOR: Yes, that would be his identification tag.

GRENNAN: Identification tag.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Josephine Grennan Oral History Transcript
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