**Paul:** Good evening. This is Paul Seacrest for the National Park Service. Today is Friday April 28th, 1995. I’m in Latham, New York at Provincial House which is a residence for the Sisters of St. Joseph and I’m sitting with Sister Helen Eugene McNally, C.S.J.

Sister Helen came from Ireland in 1926. She was eight years old at that time. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

**Helen:** Alright Paul, I was born March 8th 1918.

**Paul:** Can you explain to me what the C.S.J after your name stands for?

**Helen:** We are Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet and C.S.J stands for Congregation of St. Joseph.

**Paul:** Can you spell Carondelet for me?

**Helen:** C-A-R-O-N-D-E-L-E-T.

**Paul:** That’s the full name of the order, correct? Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondelet.

**Helen:** When we came from France 158 years ago, we settled in a little town near St. Louis, Missouri called Carondelet. That’s why we adopted that name as part of our title.

**Paul:** That’s interesting, I didn’t know that. Where were you born in Ireland?

**Helen:** I was born in Belfast, Ireland.

**Paul:** Also you’re Northern Ireland.

**Helen:** I’m a Northerner, yes.

**Paul:** That’s quite rare for us to find. Tell me a little bit about Belfast in 1918. Tell me a little bit about the city and what was going on there at that time.

**Helen:** Belfast is the capital of the north and so it was probably the largest and most important city but you have to remember that Ireland is a very small country and so it might not be considered terribly big in relation to American cities. I don’t remember too terribly much about it. I remember where I lived and where I went to school…

**Paul:** Let’s start there then. Explain to me where you lived in Belfast.

**Helen:** I lived in St. Augustine’s Parish on Cromac Street, C-R-O-M-A-C. I had lived there with my aunt for several years when my parents left for America. I went to St. Augustine’s School and the city was just an average city. I can’t remember anything unusual about it.

**Paul:** Is there one building that sticks out from your childhood in Belfast that you recall the town? One specific building.

**Helen:** On Falls Road, which was one of the important streets, I remember- you’ll laugh at this- the movie theatre because one of my brothers’ godmother owned it and we could get into the theatre for free. That’s why I remember that building.

**Paul:** Do you remember what movies you watched at that time?

**Helen:** I couldn’t tell you that. I just know that when I was small my oldest sister would take me to the movies on Saturday evening if I had been good. There were times I didn’t go on Saturday evening. But I remember we had to take the trolley and then on the way home, we get an ice cream slider.

You don’t call it a sandwich, ice cream sandwich over there. It’s an ice cream slider. Then we’d run all the way home because we had spent the money for the bus going to the ice cream parlour.

**Paul:** Did your mother or father in later years ever relay any stories about your birth?

**Helen:** In Ireland, since I am a Catholic, you’re baptised within two days of your birth. My mother then sent me out with the nurse and my godmother, who was my eldest sister, to the church for my baptism. She had intended to name me ‘Sheila’, so when they returned, she started calling me her little Sheila and my sister promptly said, “But I didn’t have her named Sheila” and my brother said, “Would you mind telling me what you did have her named?” “Ethna Mary.”

It was a name I never liked throughout my years of having it and I was very happy to get rid of it when I became a nun.

**Paul:** Can you spell Ethna for me please?

**Helen:** E-T-H-N-A.

**Paul:** Ethna Mary McNally.

**Helen:** Correct.

**Paul:** Tell me a little bit about the actual house that you lived in that you remember.

**Helen:** I’m afraid my original house I couldn’t tell you about because when I was two we were burned out. They simply announced to my mother that tomorrow we burn you out. We were living in a Protestant section and for some reason known only to themselves, they didn’t want us there. So my mother stood in the street with seven of us, I was the youngest, and watched it burn.

Then I moved to my aunt’s home because we had no other place to go. That was a three or four storey high place. My aunt was a seamstress and had about a dozen women who worked under her. Aunty, by the way, was my mother’s sister. So I have greater memories of her home than I have of my own.

**Paul:** That’s fine. Explain to me, did you live with your aunt until you left to come to America?

**Helen:** My parents came to America when I was five and they brought three of the seven children with them. The second- oldest girl was then 18 and my mother thought she would be a big help, and the two boys just above me or just older than I also went because she said they were such devils she couldn’t leave them with anyone.

Then she put two in boarding schools. The eldest girl had graduated from college and so her salary went to my aunt and in return aunty took care of me.

**Paul:** So you were the only one left in Ireland at the time?

**Helen:** Maureen and I lived with my aunt, and then Brian and Irene were in boarding school.

**Paul:** Were these the four youngest of the children?

**Helen:** No, not necessarily. Kathleen was the second oldest and she came to America. The fifth and sixth were the two boys. I was number seven. The fifth and sixth went with my parents to America.

**Paul:** Just for the sake of the listener, can you name your brothers and your sisters in order from oldest to youngest?

**Helen:** Maureen, Kathleen, Brian, Irene, Leo, Kevin, and yours truly.

**Paul:** You were the youngest of the children?

**Helen:** I’m the baby.

**Paul:** Are large families a common thing in the north of Ireland?

**Helen:** Yes, I think so. Though, I would say that as of 1995 that might not necessarily be true, but it was true. In fact there were four others, all of whom died before I came. One at the age of seven and then the others more in their baby years. I was really in rank, number 11.

**Paul:** What do you know about the death of the child who was seven?

**Helen:** Her name Eileen and she was the only blue-eyed blonde in the family and therefore very popular with my parents. Some other little friend and she were playing outside and the friend apparently, perhaps unintentionally, threw some kind of a stone and it hit her up here, just to the right of right eye and caused some reaction which probably in today’s medical world could have been cared for.

But then that was not possible and the doctor told my mother that she would die within six months and she did, which was sad for my mother.

**Paul:** This was prior to your birth.

**Helen:** Yes, I never saw Eileen.

**Paul:** I’m just curious if your mother in later years would talk about this willingly or…

**Helen:** Yes, she did. It was rather difficult because she had just lost her own mother about two weeks previously and Eileen kept insisting that, “You’re going to go with me if I have to die.” So my mother said, “Grandma will be there to meet you and you know I can’t go with you because- Brian was the baby then- and I have to take care of Brian.” That satisfied the little girl that her mother couldn’t go with her.

**Paul:** What was your mother’s name?

**Helen:** Allen Radcliffe.

**Paul:** How do you spell Radcliffe?

**Helen:** R-A-D-C-L-I-F-F-E.

**Paul:** Tell me what you know about your mother’s family background.

**Helen:** My mother had one sister, the one who took care of me and then she had I think three brothers. One of the boys came to America and settled in Ohio, but I saw relatively little of him so I can’t really tell you much about him. The rest of them all remained in Ireland and died there.

**Paul:** What did her parents do? What did her father do for a living?

**Helen:** To be honest I can’t remember.

**Paul:** Were your grandparents living when you were there?

**Helen:** No, they were all gone before I came. I never had grandparents who lived during my lifetime.

**Paul:** Do you know how your parents met?

**Helen:** They met at a dance and I used to tease my mother about that. She went to a dance and acquired a husband.

**Paul:** Do you know what year they were married?

**Helen:** Just keep remembering that I’m the youngest and I…

**Paul:** But you’re doing pretty well so far.

**Helen:** I just can’t remember the date, the exact year. I don’t know.

**Paul:** Tell me a little bit about your mother’s personality.

**Helen:** My mother was very charming and a very beautiful lady. I can say that because I resemble my father. She had an outgoing personality, very able to care for any situation that arose. She was not a clinging violet or anything like that.

**Paul:** Can you describe what she looked like in words? If you would like to do a verbal picture of your mother.

**Helen:** She was very graceful and tall, and as I said very nice looking…

**Paul:** Color of hair?

**Helen:** Brown hair, brown eyes…

**Paul:** Is there a specific dress that you remember your mother wearing?

**Helen:** She liked the color red, so she’d have possibly a red dress, or a red hat or something like that, and with her dark hair it always looked very nice on her. She liked to dress well. She was very fussy about that, very fussy about even the way we children walked.

My one brother Leo, she said she could never do anything with him because he would, according to her, he waddled. Despite that, he was her favorite I think.

**Paul:** Tell me a story about your mother that you associate with your childhood. Either something that she did or a story about something you did together. It can either be in Ireland or here in America.

**Helen:** My mother loved to go church in the evening and pay a little visit and invariably I would be taken along, probably because I was young. This was in America though and in fact it was in the church that I whispered to her that I wanted to be a nun.

That did not go over very well because I already had a brother who was in the seminary and two sisters who were nuns, and I think my mother was getting a little tired of this. She would have liked me to stay with her.

So, I timidly told her, in St. Anthony’s Church in Chadwicks. That’s near Utica, New York and I should add that one of her pet peeves was that you were never to talk in church. That was next to an [unclear 00:13:41] sin if you talked in church. So I pulled down her dress and she just gave me a withering look and then five minutes later I tried again and she looked at me and said, “If you have to go to the bathroom, you may leave.”

By that time I did have to and then finally I said, “You remember what Mother Mary James said about stealing me where she’s going to?” Mother Mary James was the principle at the school I was attending and she had teasingly said to my mother one day, “We’re going to steal your little girl.”

So my mother picked up her gloves, and her pocket book, and out of the church with me behind her and then when she got me outside she said, “Now say that again.” That was her introduction to the fact that I wanted to be a nun.

**Paul:** I can imagine. I bet this will crop up again later in the interview. What was your father’s name?

**Helen:** Owen, O-W-E-N Thomas McNally.

**Paul:** What do you know about his family background?

**Helen:** His family background was… there were a lot of religious in my father’s family. In fact he told me once that I was the 23rd in three generations. His uncle, that would be my grand uncle, was Bishop of Monaghan. My father was from Monaghan in Ireland.

**Paul:** Can you spell that please.

**Helen:** M-O-N-A-G-H-A-N. It’s a small town. I had been there and I’ve been in the cathedral which Bishop Charles McNally, his uncle, was in the act of building at the time of his death. There’s an announcement up to that effect, a plaque with Bishop Charles McNally on it.

So my father’s family was very religious and I think that’s possibly where all the vocations in my family came from. I didn’t see him of course from five to eight, almost nine and then he went back to Ireland when I was 14 and died there when I was 16, and he’s buried in Belfast, Ireland.

**Paul:** Tell me a little bit about what his personality was like.

**Helen:** My father was very tall, very gentlemanly, very refined. Somewhat quiet, my mother was more of a talker than my father. He had a beautiful singing voice which I did not inherit. Just a very fine man.

**Paul:** Do you know what work he did in Ireland before he came to America?

**Helen:** He owned a store at one point but he was also a CPA and he couldn’t get anything as I said, during my babyhood there and that was the reason why they came to America. He just decided he’d better leave while he still had enough money to go.

**Paul:** Let me ask you the same sort of questions as I did about your mother. Is there a story that you like to tell from your childhood about your father? Something that you shared with him or something he did?

**Helen:** It’s a little difficult because you see during all those several years I didn’t see him but when I got to America, he was living in Brooklyn with my mother but they were living in Brooklyn anyway. We lived on the third floor of a big apartment house.

When he’d come home from work you had to ring a bell and then up in the apartment you push the button which opened that door. So I always knew when he was coming. I would dash down the stairs and he’d pick me up in his arms. and carry me upstairs and that was a big part of my day, when daddy carried me upstairs.

**Paul:** Do you remember your parents leaving when you were five?

**Helen:** Yes.

**Paul:** Can you explain that situation to me a little bit?

**Helen:** Because Father Kevin, that’s the brother was three and a half years older than I. He kept saying, “I’m going to America and you can’t go” and I wanted to strangle him. I do remember standing on the street watching the taxi drive away, and Kevin’s in the back window waving at me frantically and I think I was overcome with jealousy to think that he was getting something that I couldn’t do.

I didn’t quite understand that. Why were my parents leaving me? It’s a little hard to explain to a five year old and certainly I understood when I grew up but at that point I felt very rejected, or neglected. I really wasn’t neglected because my aunt was very good to me.

**Paul:** I’m curious and you may not know the answer to this. Why was the choice made for both of them to go? It may not have been a choice but what do you know about that?

**Helen:** I don’t really think I can answer that. I guess they both decided to go because they had to make a home and they were hoping that the rest of the children will eventually join them. I suppose if dad went out to work then somebody had to be in the home especially to care for those smaller boys whom I have mentioned. I think it was a united decision.

**Paul:** When your parents went to America, that first time when they went over, tell me what work your father got?

**Helen:** My father worked when he was in Brooklyn as a CPA but then we moved up outside Utica to a little place called Chadwicks. He was unable to get that kind of work there and he did some factory work I remember. Possibly it had to do with finances in the factory but his health was never very good and eventually he had to stop working and that was when he went back to Ireland and became ill. He went back to see his brothers and then he died there when I was 16.

**Paul:** When you say his health wasn’t good, what sorts of maladies did he have?

**Helen:** I’m not exactly sure. It was just internal problems. but I can’t really be specific. I was probably too small to comprehend.

**Paul:** This is something that he had always complained in his life?

**Helen:** No, I don’t think so but he died at the age of 60 so that was a little young.

**Paul:** So your parents go, you’re five years old. Tell me about life with your aunt. What was her name?

**Helen:** Mary Radcliffe.

**Paul:** This is your mother’s...

**Helen:** My mother’s sister and she never married. I went to school shortly thereafter and my older sister Maureen taught me- we would call it first grade in America but you called it first standard there. Then I went to second standard when I entered school and she was my teacher and that was a catastrophe.

**Paul:** Your aunt was your teacher.

**Helen:** No, my sister.

**Paul:** Your sister was your teacher?

**Helen:** My sister was my teacher. She was 15 years older than I, so she had just graduated from college. One thing was for example that the class would stand up when the teacher entered the room and say together, “Good morning Ms. McNally” but not this child. Why would I do such a stupid thing as that? I never did that at home.

So I stayed right in my seat. Then if I didn’t understand something I’d run right up the aisle to her and she’d whisper, “Go and sit down”. I thought that was very unkind of her, to say the least.

So she went home and told aunty that I was ruining her discipline. Aunty proceeded to spank me on the spot nature intended and the next morning I stood up and said, “Good morning Ms. McNally” but I thought it was extremely foolish.

**Paul:** Tell me about your aunt, her personality, and your relationship with your aunt.

**Helen:** Aunty was rather a petit lady. My mother was tall but aunty was small. She was very warm and loving and a very strong Catholic, daily mass every day. She was goodness and kindness personified and she loved all these nieces and nephews that I’ve mentioned. She was just delighted to be able to help my mother during her time of need here.

**Paul:** She took two of the children, correct? And then the other two were put in boarding school and the rest came…

**Helen:** The three came across the ocean.

**Paul:** It was you and Maureen?

**Helen:** Maureen and I, yes.

**Paul:** There’s a huge age gap.

**Helen:** Yes, she’s 15 years older. She was my godmother at the time of baptism, you remember? And gave me that name which I did not care for.

**Paul:** Tell me about the things your aunt liked to do. What were the things that she enjoyed doing for herself?

**Helen:** I could almost say nothing to that because aunty was the most outgoing person who wanted to do everything to help the family, the neighbors, anybody. She was just a very charitable lady. I can’t really remember her ever doing anything for herself that wasn’t absolutely necessary.

**Paul:** Did she ever teach you to do something?

**Helen:** Not too much. As I said I was only with her till I was eight. Of course she did all the cooking and cleaning with Maureen’s help. I think I didn’t have to do much of anything at that age.

**Paul:** You started talking about this before and I re-routed the question. I want to come back to the interior of your aunt’s it was an apartment?

**Helen:** No, she owned her own home but for some unknown reason she never had the problems. that we did. It must have been a different section of the city.

**Paul:** Meaning like religious conflicts?

**Helen:** Yes, and it had several storeys, two or three I think, and was quite close to school which made it nice for me.

**Paul:** Did you have your own bedroom in that house?

**Helen:** Yes.

**Paul:** Can you describe what you remember of your childhood bedroom?

**Helen:** It wasn’t a very big room but it had all the necessary things that a bedroom would require. One thing that came to my mind when you asked that was that the first Christmas that my parents and the other three were in America, aunty presented me with this enormous doll for Christmas.

She said that Santa Claus had brought it all the way from America from my sister Kathleen. I can remember that night lying in bed and thinking, “Wasn’t that nice of Santa to do that?”

**Paul:** Can you describe the doll for me?

**Helen:** I can’t remember now what the doll looked like. It was quite big. At least I thought it was big. Maybe it wasn’t big but I was so small then.

**Paul:** You mentioned that your aunt was religious.

**Helen:** Yes.

**Paul:** Can you explain to me how you practised your religion at home?

**Helen:** We said grace before and after meals and she would have us kneel down at the kitchen table and we said the Rosary together and she talked about God and tried to teach me. We frequently visited St. Augustine’s Church. I went back once as an adult many years later and I thought, “Oh my goodness it’s so small”, the church. But when I was tiny I thought it was enormous.

I have one funny thing to tell you though, on the occasion that I visited the church as an adult, Sister Kathleen was with me. That was the second. Maureen and Kathleen are the two who became nuns. She whispered to me while I was in church and I was bursting with laughter when she did it.

It had a choir loft or something up here and she said, “Do you remember the day when you threw your Rosary beads over and hit the bald-headed man on the head?” He was down on the church. I said, “I never did such a thing.” She said, “Oh yes, you did”.

**Paul:** Do you remember the grace that you said before dinner?

**Helen:** Bless us, oh Lord in these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord, Amen.

**Paul:** Do you remember any other prayers that you would have said as a child?

**Helen:** The ‘Hail Mary’ and the ‘Our Father’ and the Confiteor and of course all of those put together in the Rosary.

**Paul:** Were they said in English?

**Helen:** Yes. Gaelic is the national language of Ireland but you learn it in school and I doubt that especially today, any of the children speak it at home. It’s Spanish, if [inaudible 00:2747] French or German or Spanish if we were students now.

**Paul:** Did you study Gaelic when you were in school in Ireland?

**Helen:** No. I don’t remember anything. But the older girls in the family were able to speak it a little but I never acquired that.

**Paul:** Did your parents… were they able to speak or your aunt maybe?

**Helen:** I don’t think any of the adults in my life- I don’t ever remember them speaking Gaelic at all.

**Paul:** Is there a piece of furniture that sticks out in your mind from your aunt’s house for some reason? Or a piece of furniture that has a story attached to it?

**Helen:** As I said, she was a seamstress and so in one section of the house she had like six or eight sewing machines. In those days you didn’t go to the store and buy a new dress or suit. You went and picked out the material you wanted and a pattern and then aunty would make it according to your specifications. Then of course you’ll have to come in for some fittings and things like that. I remember ladies doing that and I was getting in their way probably more often than I should have but…

**Paul:** Is there a dress that you remember having as a child in Ireland that excited your mind?

**Helen:** She made me a coat with a little matching hat. But I called it my [unclear 00:29:17] wasn’t too good. I guess my English wasn’t too good. I remember once I went to Monaghan to the convent where my sisters eventually entered and I think it was pink and white.

One of the sisters made a comment, “It’s such a lovely combination”. Of course she meant the color combination but at that point in my life I thought of combinations as being underwear. I don’t know where I got that from but it must have been common. I said very primly to her, “It isn’t a combination, it’s a coat”, which caused my sister Irene to be highly embarrassed.

**Paul:** Were there certain types of behavior that were expected of children at that time period?

**Helen:** Yes.

**Paul:** Can you elaborate on this?

**Helen:** Children were to be seen and not heard I guess but my parents and aunty didn’t carry that out fully. She would ask me about what had happened in school and so on, and I would be permitted to discuss that, give my viewpoints.

If she didn’t exactly agree with the way I had done something she would then gently proceed to explain to me that, “You shouldn’t do it that way”. I remember listening wide-eyed to her and saying, “I pushed that boy who pushed me” or something like that and she would explain that a lady didn’t act that way. I can’t very specifically remember any of the discussions that we had but I know that they were permitted.

**Paul:** Were there certain rules for you to follow when you were in public as opposed to in the house?

**Helen:** No, not necessarily. I think she believed that you should be a little lady in and out of the house and I don’t think… other than the time she spanked me because I didn’t say, “Good morning Ms... McNally”, I don’t ever remember her spanking me any other time. I guess I did what I was supposed to do and of course Maureen also impressed those things on me.

**Paul:** Must be hard living with your teacher. You alluded to this a little bit before and I was hoping that maybe you could talk a little bit more about the conflict as a child. Do you remember as a child of seeing between the Protestant population and the Catholic population?

**Helen:** Not only as a child but as an adult I can remember. It’s a conflict that has been going on for 800 years. Many of the Irish bitterly resented the fact that England owned Ireland at one point but then about… I’m not too sure of my date here but somewhere around 1920- something, Bordish stayed, but England retained the six counties of the north, which of course included Belfast.

That caused a lot of anger, bitterness, resentment I suppose is a better word, among the Irish because I can recall even just a few years ago when I went over there to see Sister Kathleen, she was in Middletown County Armagh in a convent there.

When we left the convent we went out in the car, we had to go through a checkpoint and the British soldiers stopped you and inspected the car. I do remember whispering to Kathleen, “Should I get out my American passport?” and she would say, “No, that’s not necessary because they know the convent car and you’re in it so…” I laugh and thought about it though. How would we in America like it if German or French or Italian soldiers were walking around on our street corners? We wouldn’t really like it, I don’t think.

**Paul:** Is there an incident that you remember as a child at seven or eight years old that sticks out in your mind, something you witnessed, that would be a reflection of this problem?

**Helen:** No, I think I was more or less safely guarded by aunty and I don’t recall anything specific but as an adult and as a nun, I went over there one year and I was in Belfast visiting some cousins.

Margaret Marlon was one of them and she took me downtown shopping. She said, “Remember, when we get to a certain point you have to open your pocket book and show the contents.” And I said, “I will not”. When we got to that point she opened her pocket book and a soldier inspected it, and I sailed right through without doing it. I heard him say, “Go right ahead, sister”. I suppose he thought, “I’m not going to get into a fracas with that one.”

She also thought I should take off the veil, which I choose to wear. It’s optional. Many of the sisters do not, but I choose to. That’s probably how he realized I was a Sister. I said, “There’s nothing in my pocket book that he needs to see” and proved quite a bit the English soldiers are still there but they aren’t at the checkpoints anymore.

You can pass through without… but I understand anyway that they are still there but I hope things will improve and eventually Ireland will be united, the north and the south. We hope.

**Paul:** When you were a child was there communication between you and your parents in America?

**Helen:** Yes, In fact my mother came back to visit the children she had left behind when I was seven.

**Paul:** What do you remember about that visit? What sticks out of your mind?

**Helen:** As I said, my mother was very tall, very pretty, and I was still quite small at seven. I remember looking up at her and I was so pleased that she had come back to visit me. We had a picture taken, the two of us together. I can’t imagine where that picture is today. I know I don’t have it. I was very happy and pleased to think that she did return just [unclear 00:36:25].

**Paul:** How long?

**Helen:** Just a few weeks.

**Paul:** Do you remember her bringing anything from America?

**Helen:** I think she brought us gifts but I can’t specifically remember now just what they were. Then she returned to America and then I came when I was eight.

**Paul:** Tell me a little bit about the process of you being told that you were going to go. When it was time, how did they approach the subject with you?

**Helen:** My mother sent Kathleen back. She was then approximately 21, to bring the two younger ones out. Irene and I came together. Irene was 15 at the time we came over the ocean but Kathleen stayed and entered the convent with Maureen and didn’t really tell my mother that she was going to do that.

So the two youngsters came over alone. I can remember then Kathleen coming but then I saw her only for a week or two. We more or less missed each other all through our lives, you understand.

**Paul:** Do you think Kathleen had been planning this all out in the back of her mind?

**Helen:** I think so.

**Paul:** That the excuse to get back to Ireland was to pick up the kids but she had other intentions.

**Helen:** Then aunty got all the things they needed in order to enter and they entered in Monaghan.

**Paul:** What do you remember about the process of getting papers together or being photographed if you had to be photographed for a passport or anything like that?

**Helen:** All the children automatically became citizens when my parents became citizens, at least those under 21.

**Paul:** But had your parents become citizens by the time you…?

**Helen:** They had the necessary papers and everything. Being a child I didn’t pay much attention to that but I know I became a citizen because my parents were. I’m sure all that paperwork went on but I wasn’t paying attention.

**Paul:** Did you want to go America?

**Helen:** Yes, I missed my parents, I missed my brothers, but I was also sad about leaving aunty behind. Eventually aunty came over some time after we did. It was exciting because I’d never been on a big boat like that and…

**Paul:** How did you perceive America before you got there? How did you think about it?

**Helen:** I don’t really think I thought about it at all because I knew nothing about it. I knew we got these letters back from my parents and so on but being a child I don’t think I had too much of a visual understanding of what America would be. I remember the boat and coming over on the boat.

**Paul:** Before you got on the boat did aunty give any kind of [inaudible 00:39:26] with her or something when you were leaving?

**Helen:** I don’t think so but the water there isn’t deep for a big ocean steamer to come in. So you went out in what they called a tender.

**Paul:** Was it from Belfast, the ship?

**Helen:** Yes, but it was a small boat with glass windows all around it. Then you went out a certain point and you circled the big boat and finally came in close enough to get aboard. That night there was a terrible storm and I think I was a little bit scared. The water was splashing against the windows but at the same time I was all excited about doing it. When we got aboard…

**Paul:** That’s you and Irene.

**Helen:** Just Irene and myself.

**Paul:** Your aunty did she go as far as the ship?

**Helen:** She went as far as she could and then when we got on the tender she couldn’t go any farther. So we got on aboard and we were conducted to our stateroom. I remember there were bunk beds and I’d never seen a bunk bed before so the next hour I ran up and down the little stairway. Irene couldn’t get me to stop and go to bed. She was getting tired.

The next morning the boat was moving obviously. I always stood on one foot to put the sock on the other foot and of course I fell right down because the boat was moving and I couldn’t keep my equilibrium. I sat on the floor and looked at Irene and said, “Wouldn’t you think they’d stop this boat so I could get my socks on?” She probably had a good laugh behind her.

**Paul:** Did your aunt have the intentions of coming to America at a future point?

**Helen:** She probably might have but she never talked about it.

**Paul:** Do you remember saying goodbye to her?

**Helen:** Yes, and that was rather a tearful period because I hated to leave aunty. She’d been so good to me. By the way she and my mother are both buried in Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Whitesboro, which is near Utica.

**Paul:** What was the name of that, Mount…?

**Helen:** Mt Olivet Cemetery, Whitesboro, New York. I took care of aunty. In fact aunty died in my arms... My mother though, we found her dead. She was alone at the time she died, but after aunty came over I would say to her, “Can I sit in your lap like I used to?” Then she’d say, “Oh, you’d kill me” because she was very petit. Of course I’m 5”7 so I [unclear 00:42:14] she wanted me to sit in her lap.

**Paul:** So the boat is pulling out, what time of the year is this?

**Helen:** October, and the pelting rain, because it rains half the time in Ireland anyway. Ireland’s noted for the rain. We had lots of… Irene didn’t find them amusing but I did. We had a dance on deck one night and the players went off to have refreshments and I had two instruments apart before she caught up with me. I wanted to see what was on the inside. You can see that poor Irene practically had white hair by the time we reached America.

**Paul:** Were you pretty much in the care of Irene or was there a chaperone?

**Helen:** The stewardess. That was the arrangement that one of the stewardess was to keep track of us because Irene was only 15 and I was a rather obstreperous child for her to care for.

**Paul:** Can you describe the cabin in more detail? You said it had bunk beds. What else was in the cabin?

**Helen:** It had bunk beds but it had chairs and I can’t remember whether it had a wash basin or things like that. I really don’t remember those essentials.

**Paul:** You mentioned the dance on the ship, were there any other events or things for you to do on the ship that stick out in your mind?

**Helen:** No wait, I can remember having the deck chairs.

**Paul:** What about safety drills?

**Helen:** No, I don’t remember those. I remember that one day I almost fell overboard. I was trying to see the fish, and how can you see the fish when you’re so short? According to Irene, a sailor grabbed me by the ankles. I almost went in.

**Paul:** What about dining? Where did you eat on the ship?

**Helen:** We had a lovely dining room. In the dining room, I presume they don’t do it that way today, but there was silence until the captain said grace. One of the first days that we were there I’m sure the waiter was trying to help take care of the chair for this little girl but I thought he was trying to take it. So I simply announced quite loudly, “Please don’t take that chair, I need it.” In the perfect silence that little voice was heard throughout the room and Irene was red with embarrassment.

**Paul:** Did you get sick?

**Helen:** The younger you were the less chance there is of sickness. Isn’t that strange?

**Paul:** What about Irene?

**Helen:** Irene did, but I don’t recall that I did. There must have been a priest aboard because we had mass every day. I remember that.

**Paul:** What sticks out in your mind about that? You sure smiled a bit when you said that. Is there something?

**Helen:** That was nice because I was used to going to mass daily. I was very happy to do that.

**Paul:** Do you know how long the voyage was?

**Helen:** Probably about eight days. I can’t specifically tell you. I enjoyed it though because it was an experience I had never had before and I was all eyes, ears, nose, and throat so I wouldn’t miss anything.

**Paul:** Tell me about when the ship came to America. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

**Helen:** Yes, and I was just amazed. That big, tall lady standing there in the water. Irene was trying to explain to me that it’d been given as a gift from France but again I had never seen anything like that. That was amazing, all the noise, the bustle, the excitement, and the tooting cars, and all the rest of it. Ireland was quite a bit calmer than that so I couldn’t take it all in.

**Paul:** Tell me what you remember about the processing part.

**Helen:** We had to have a physical exam. I remember that, to be sure we weren’t bringing any diseases in. By the way we had to wait six months before we left because Irene had an appendectomy and they wouldn’t allow her to come until they were sure that she was perfectly healthy.

In contrast to the way illegal immigrants come in today, this always amuses me. I remember the gentleman sitting me up on a desk and giving me a book to read and since I had always been an avid reader, I went right along fine on that. I remember he was amazed to think that an eight year old could read, but I didn’t think anything of that. I thought everybody read that way.

**Paul:** While you were being processed at Ellis Island and your sister having had this operation, do you know anything about what happened to your sister during this process? Was she always with you?

**Helen:** I can’t remember whether she was with me in the room. She might have been but I can’t answer that. But I know that they were pretty well aware of her condition because that was all down on the paper, that we had waited six months following her surgery. I really don’t remember whether she was there or not.

**Paul:** Is there anything else that you remember about that particular portion of the immigration experience into America? Maybe what the room looked like or something like that.

**Helen:** No, that’s very vague in my mind.

**Paul:** What about your luggage, where did you pick it up? Did you have luggage?

**Helen:** I’m sure we had some luggage but again Irene probably took care of all that and I was not the least been interested. There were so many more interesting things to look at.

**Paul:** Did someone come and meet you?

**Helen:** Oh yes, my mother.

**Paul:** Tell me about seeing your mom. You’ve just seen her about a year before.

**Helen:** Yes, but I was very happy to see her and I couldn’t wait to get home to see my dad and my brothers. Do you want to hear a really funny one? But this happened after we were there. We went to St. Augustine’s I think it was there too. We went to school and you had to cross over Flatbush Avenue, which was a very busy street.

My first day at school my mother was afraid that I might get killed with all those speeding cars that I wasn’t used to. Kevin was appointed to be my escort to school but at the same time my mother was afraid that maybe he wouldn’t do that job nicely so she followed at a discreet distance to see how he obeyed.

She said that he didn’t even want to walk with you as far as Flatbush but then he let you catch up with him so then when we got to the busy street she said, “He put his arm around your head” and she said, “I expected to see your head go flying in the side walk.” He dashed me across, dropped me on the other side, and flew away. Big brother didn’t want to be seen with little sister.

**Paul:** Tell me a little bit more about things that were new. You’re living in Brooklyn, which is New York City. What were some of the great discoveries that you were making as a girl in this new country?

**Helen:** I used to sit up in the window. As I said, it was the third floor and the borough president lived directly across the street. I don’t know if they still have borough presidents but they did then. Apparently he’d lost a child.

I don’t remember if it was a son or a daughter, and I remember the funeral cortege coming out of his home was covered with a blanket of roses. I was just high enough so that I could see the whole blanket as I looked down. I had never seen anything like that at a funeral and I thought that was amazing.

That area of Brooklyn today I think is terribly run down but it wasn’t then. This was too many years ago.

**Paul:** What was the flavor of the neighborhood at that time?

**Helen:** Just a lot of large apartment houses and…

**Paul:** Who was living in the neighborhood? What groups?

**Helen:** There were people more like my own family. Middle class, average people. There were a lot of children and so on but I can’t really recall too much other than that.

**Paul:** Were there any types of people you had never seen before until you came to America?

**Helen:** I did see some people who spoke Spanish, which of course I was not familiar with, and there were some black people. While there were some blacks in Ireland I don’t mean there weren’t, they hadn’t been a part of my days so to speak. So I was quite interested in all of them. I was interested in all the students at school…

**Paul:** Tell me about school, what that experience was like for you the first six…

**Helen:** I was young enough so that I just seemed to fit in quite nicely. By contrast, Irene didn’t. She was more a high school student then and she found it very difficult to fit in. But I think because I was so much younger it was never a big problem.

**Paul:** Was there an incident that you remember, or maybe Irene told you about, where she was made fun of for being an immigrant?

**Helen:** She was different. In fact she didn’t graduate. She dropped out of high school because she was not happy there. She went to business school and became a secretary and was one all her life, and a very good one. At the time of her retirement she was secretary at March Air Force Base in California. She had moved out there and… but school, she found difficult.

**Paul:** What about you, did anybody ever make fun of you because you were different?

**Helen:** I don’t think so, no. I don’t recall any. I don’t think I had much of a brogue, which is the Irish accent. Maybe I did and I just wasn’t aware of it. I was kind of accepted and I accepted all of them and we got along quite nicely.

**Paul:** Tell me about what happened to the two children that were still in boarding school when you were…

**Helen:** Brian. Brian was nine years my senior and he came over to America the year before I did. Irene was the other one and she came in with me.

**Paul:** And Maureen stayed over there.

**Helen:** Maureen stayed over there. When Maureen and Kathleen entered the convent, and then back about 1949 I think, one of the bishops in California who was Irish by birth, wanted more sister teachers. In fact he even asked my community but they couldn’t at that time give him. He decided, “I’ll go over to Ireland and I’ll get some sisters over there and bring them over here.”

So eight came, in fact 10 came. The Reverend Mother came and one of the eight chosen was Maureen, probably because the family was here, and then Kathleen was the Reverend Mother’s travelling companion so she returned to Ireland with her after they were settled here. Maureen was in California from that time on, and she died there in 1987.

**Paul:** This would be a good point for me to ask you to explain, we have five minutes left, how you became a Sister and who influenced you to do that.

**Helen:** When we settled in Chadwicks outside Utica, I was attending public school. That was seventh and eighth grade and first and second year in high. At that time the two nuns in Ireland are writing these besieging letters to my mother. I would lose my soul in a public and would she please send me back to Ireland to be educated with their sisters. My mother said, “No way, she will stay and enter like you did.”

But she compromised and sent me into Utica to St. Francis De Sales High School. I went there as a junior and then my class was taking Latin three. But the public school I attended hadn’t stressed on it so I had none. I was in French three. So then I had a study period in the back of the room while they had Latin three, and this Sister came in to teach them. I noticed everyone was instantly on their best behavior. Her name was Sister Mary Seraphine and she’s still right here in this house.

At the end of the junior year, Father Kevin who went to the seminary from eighth grade, he came home and said, “Look, you’re going to be a senior next year, what do you want to do?” I said, “I’d like to be a nurse, but I don’t have any Latin” and in those days you needed it. He said, “Take two years as a senior” and I said, “I can’t do that.” He said, “Oh yes, you can.”

So I took two years as a senior and Sister Seraphine taught the Latin. She had me under foot quite a bit because of the two years in one and then I began to think that she was pretty nice. She was really the reason but she never said anything to me about being a nun.

When I went and told her I wanted to be, the only thing she said was, “I know you’ll be very happy.” That was it. I was 16 until March and then I became 17 and I entered that September.

**Paul:** Tell me just a little bit about the process of when you enter. What does it entail?

**Helen:** It’s very different today as compared with when I entered.

**Paul:** And this is what year?

**Helen:** 1935. I entered in September and you were a postulant for six months and then on March 19th I received the habit of the sisters. Today we only have about 25 who still wear the habit.

**Paul:** For the sake of the tape I’ll just say that habit is the actual clothing in the convent.

**Helen:** Yes, then you were in office for two years and then you took your first vows and then about three years and five months later you took Perpetual vows. I did my perpetual vows in 1941 and that was the same year that Father Kevin was ordained a priest and we went to war with Japan, if you remember.

**Paul:** That’s four kids, right? Kathleen, Maureen, Kevin, and you.

**Helen:** Yes. Once I said to my mother that year, “This has been quite a year”. I took my final vows, and Father Kevin was ordained, and we went to war with Japan. She was shocked to think I would put war with Japan and with the other…

**Paul:** How did your parents feel about you doing this? Of course they had other children who were interested in following this line of course.

**Helen:** First of all my father died when I was 16, remember. In February.

**Paul:** He’d gone back to Ireland you said.

**Helen:** Yes. He was not there when I entered in September. My mother was… she never said, “No, you can’t do that” but she didn’t really approve. I think she was a little tired about it after the other three had gone and now… and it was the year my father died so it was rather hard. She didn’t have an easy life.

**Paul:** Why did your father go back?

**Helen:** To visit family. He still had some family members there and then he became ill over there and died over there.

**Paul:** What was it that he died of?

**Helen:** Interior complications of some of the main organs of the body but again I didn’t know enough about it to be specific.

**Paul:** Can you tell us in one minute, what your most proud accomplishment that brings you the most satisfaction in your life?

**Helen:** Next year, Paul, I will celebrate my 60th anniversary and I’ve been completely happy. I’m very sure that this is what God made me to do with my life, and I wouldn’t be anything else except what I am.

**Paul:** Thank you. This is Paul Seacrest, signing off with Sister Helen Eugene McNally, on April 28th 1995 here at Provincial House in Latham. Thank you.

**Helen:** You’re welcome.