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VOICES ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
NOAA HERITAGE
NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN K. CALLAHAN, JR. FOR THE
NOAA 50TH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
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Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Capt. John K. Callahan, Jr. for the NOAA 50th Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on Wednesday, June 9th, 2021. It's a remote interview with Captain Callahan in Coupeville, Washington. The interviewer is Molly Graham, and I'm in Scarborough, Maine. I want to thank you for being available and taking the time to do this. I've been so excited to talk to you and have been having a lot of fun doing the research for this interview. I'm wondering if we can start at the beginning with where and when you were born.

John Callahan: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1944, January 3rd. I escaped two weeks later to New Jersey, where I was raised in West New York, New Jersey until I was thirteen. And then Bergen County, New Jersey, until I went off to college.

MG: I'm curious about your family history. You gave me some really good information in the pre-interview material. But I'm wondering if you can trace your family history as far back as you know, starting on your father's side.

JC: Yes. My dad, his mother, I believe, came from Ireland. I guess that makes me second-generation. His dad, his family was already here before my great-grandmother showed up. They probably came over before the potato famine. My wife traced my Dad's side of the family to my great, great, grandfather Jerimiah who was born in 1818 in Ireland and died in 1880 in Brooklyn, New York. He came to the US prior to the 1850's. He was living in Maryland when his son Dennis, my great grandfather, was born in 1855. We have a record of Dennis eventually living in Saugerties, New York. Dennis's son Jerimiah, my grandfather, was born in 1887 in Brooklyn, New York and died in Paterson, New Jersey in 1948. My Dad's father, Jerimiah, had three brothers and two sisters. My Dad's birth mother, Elizabeth, died on June 13, 1921. She was twenty-five years old. At that time my father was just shy of his third birthday, and he got sent off to relatives along with his sister because my grandfather couldn't support them essentially. My grandfather eventually remarried and brought the two children, my father and his sister, back home. Apparently, my dad didn't get along with his stepmom. At some point, at age thirteen, fourteen, fifteen – somewhere in there – he ran away from home and bummed around the country for a few years. He rode the rails and boxed in the featherweight division. Finally came home, graduated high school late, obviously, and then became a jack of all trades, really. His family, by the way, were lathers. They would put the lath work up in homes. He was involved in that. At some point, he worked at the Ford plant and was a union organizer. He was an international representative for the United Auto Workers Union. A lot of interesting stories. One of the ones that I can immediately recall is he had an uncle who was deaf, and he got him a job in the Ford plant. The guy's job was to pull pieces of material off a belt that had hooks on it that were rotated around the plant. At some point, it went through a wall to the next room, and somebody got caught on one of the hooks and was being dragged towards this particular wall. The results would have been catastrophic. My [great] uncle was a huge, huge man. It was my dad's uncle, rather – a huge guy. He just grabbed the belt and yanked and broke it; saved the guy's life and got fired because he had broken the belt. My dad was, at the time, involved, as I said, with the union; he was a union organizer. Through his intercession, he got my uncle's job back. Where are we here?

MG: Going back a little bit, do you know what part of Ireland your father's family originated from?

JC: Yes, it was Roscommon and Cork.

JC: I took my parents to Ireland a number of years ago. We went to [Roscommon]. Let me think. We went to that particular county. My dad had his mother's [maiden] name [McDermott], and he wanted to get some history. He had no concept of having to do research ahead of time. We got to this place where the McDermotts were known, and he went to the local priest and asked him were there any records of his mother. The priest said, "Well, there's a lot of Elizabeth McDermotts," and couldn't look anything up without a little bit more information. We toured around Roscommon, and then we headed for the southern part of Ireland, County Cork, where the other Callahans are all from. We left word at a newspaper that we were looking for any information on Elizabeth McDermott because apparently one of the newspaper reporters was very big into the history of the McDermott clan. Anyway, about a week or so later, driving around in Southern Ireland, and on the radio, I hear, "John Callahan, motoring about somewhere in Roscommon, please call so and so." I listened to the radio – "No, that can't be us, right?" Well, it was. There were three Irish stations at the time that broadcasted over the radio. We called up, and somebody thought that they were related. It turns out they were not. But that's as close as we got to finding out where my father's parents came from.

MG: Do you know how your father's mother died?

JC: No, I do not. Tell you the truth; I do not. I had been told by some of the relatives that it was complications around childbirth, but so far as I can tell, she died a couple of years after my father was born. I really don't know.

MG: Did he ever talk to you about her? Does he have any memories of his mother?

JC: No, not of her. He had memories of his father. The only thing I can really remember was that he told me one time that he really wished his father was around so he could talk to him, that he really missed being able to get his advice, etcetera. Of course, there were a lot of stories. As I said, they were lathers, and apparently, when you start off in that trade, what you end up doing is all of the grunt work. My dad was starting off in the trade, and he was working with his father, my grandfather, and his brothers. They had what was known as lather's hatchets, one of which I still have, by the way, and it has a hammer-like surface on one end and a blade like you find on a hatchet on the other end. What they would do is they would "spit" nails; they would take a mouthful of nails, and they would take the nail off their tongue in one motion and put it up against the piece of lath work and then whack it with the hammer [end of the hatchet]. If they had to cut off a piece of the lath work, they would take the hatchet end and use that. One of the things, apparently, that they did during lunch hour was they would throw these lath hammers at targets. At any rate, my dad was up on a ladder, working in a closet, and this guy showed up and wanted to organize them. They wanted to know who was in charge. My dad said that it was his father, and he [his father] was working in a different room. He said, "Come down off that ladder. We want to talk to you." These guys were kind of rough, if you will. My dad said, "No, I'm supposed to stay here." He started working again, and the guy grabbed the ladder and started

shaking it to get my dad off it. With that, my grandfather had come around the corner and saw what this guy was doing to his son and let fly with the hatchet. It landed a few inches above the guy's hand. That stopped the organizing. [laughter]

MG: Wow.

JC: Those were those kinds of stories he would talk about. That was always fun.

MG: Was that a trade your grandfather or his father was involved in over in Ireland or something he ended up doing when he settled in the United States?

JC: I think it developed here in the United States.

MG: I think you said they first settled in upstate New York. Do you know what brought them there?

JC: No, absolutely not. We've been trying to figure that out. There was a fairly large Irish community, by the way, in Brooklyn New York. Generally, what happened is somebody would settle in a particular area, and then when the relatives came over, they would move into that particular area just for the support system initially. My wife traced my great-great-grandfather to Ireland, and he migrated to Maryland.

MG: Did you get to know your father's father and stepmother?

JC: No. No, my grandfather on my father's side died on Oct 1, 1948, so I would have been like four years old. I have no recollection – excuse me. I do have one memory. I remember him sitting at a piano, and apparently, he played by ear. I remember this guy sitting at the piano. That's the extent of my memories.

MG: Was the relationship still fractured after your father grew up and after his travels, or did he come back to the family?

JC: He came back to the family. At that point, he now had two stepsisters by his new mom. He resolved whatever issues he had with her. I got the very distinct impression that he grew up a lot as he was traveling around. At one point, he told me that he was having a rough time, and he decided maybe he ought to not continue running away. He went up to a local policeman in Philadelphia and said, "Hi, I'm John Callahan." The cop looked at him and said, "So?" [laughter] He thought that everybody in the world was out looking for him, and then he realized that they weren't. When he did get home, he made up essentially with the family and stayed home and supported them actually. This was the time of the Depression, and there wasn't any work. Dad would get all these jobs selling fruit off wagons and delivering flowers and worked in a butcher shop, kind of a jack of all trades. That was the money that the family got.

MG: I think you said that when he came back, he ultimately finished high school. Do you know where that would have been?

JC: I don't have that with me right now. But I think I can probably find that out. It might have actually been in Massachusetts, Springfield, Massachusetts.

MG: Okay. I want to ask you more about your father's career, how it unfolded, and how he got involved in politics. But first, can you tell me about your mother's family history?

JC: Yes. Not much is known about my mother's family history, except the rumors. Her maiden name is Norris, and supposedly, that came from the French (Noreis?). They would always laugh and say they were all thrown out of France and had to go to Ireland because they were horse stealers. My wife did some research on ancestry.com and traced my grandfather's family back to County Cork in Ireland, and his father migrated to the states in 1879. My grandmother never finished high school – on my mother's side – because she refused to dissect a frog. She quit school. She never finished high school. She ended up marrying my grandfather, T. Harry Norris. He started out as a male secretary. In those days, if you were going to get up in the corporate world, what you did was you became a secretary to a CEO or a president of a company or whatever. You went to all of the meetings; you transcribed the notes, etcetera. That's the way you got trained. Then you moved into a position of management. Apparently, that's what he did. He ended up as the head of the Texaco Company, Maritime Department during World War II, in fact. He died on August 2nd, 1949.

MG: Do you know anything else about his role at Texaco? Did they switch some of its operations to support the war efforts?

JC: Only that he spent a lot of time in Washington. He got paid like a dollar a year. My aunt, his daughter, told me that the stuff that was going across his desk about having to supply oils to the troops, etcetera, was very classified, and nobody knew anything about it.

MG: Where was that side of the family based? Where did your mother grow up?

JC: Brooklyn, New York. In fact, when I was born, my mother was visiting my grandmother and grandfather, and I decided I was going to show up. That's why I was born in Brooklyn, not New Jersey.

MG: Can you tell me how your parents met and a little bit about their relationship?

JC: Wow. One of my mother's friends set her up on a blind date, and my father showed up. [laughter] She said she couldn't believe this guy. He was wearing a zoot suit, whatever that is. He was out there. The first thing he said was, "I'm going to marry you." She went home and told her mother, "This guy was crazy." And he did marry her.

MG: About when would this have been?

JC: I was born in '44. Probably around '42, '41.

MG: Did they get married around this same time?

JC: Yes. Someplace I have a copy of the invitation to their wedding. They were married on May 29, 1943. My sister and I used to kid because the date was not complete on the invitation. The year was missing. We wondered whether or not I was supposed to be – I have been told I was a premature baby. My sister would say, “Well, I don’t know about that, John.”

MG: Interesting. Where were your parents living at this point? Were they both working?

JC: My mother was living at home and was working in Brooklyn. She was a stenographer. My dad was – good question. I don’t know what he was doing at the time. I think he must have been working at an airplane factory.

MG: Do you know how they were impacted by the war during this time? Did your father go into the service or support the war effort at the factory?

JC: Yes, he went down to register and to volunteer. When they did a physical on him, they found that he was 4-F; he had a congenital heart defect. Apparently, when he was boxing around the country, he got as far as the semifinals in the diamond gloves weight division. They did a physical at that point and found out he had some kind of congenital heart thing going because the [heart] beat wasn’t right. They disqualified him from boxing. When he went down to volunteer, the same thing came up again. They determined he was 4-F. He ended up working. He and some buddies went, and they worked – oh, I just remember that he worked at an airplane factory. As far as my mom was concerned, after they got married, she did not work – they didn’t have any money at all. We lived in a three-room apartment in West New York, New Jersey. My parents were sleeping on a foldout couch. My sister and I had the bedroom. We had a kitchen and a bathroom; that was it. The impact that I’m aware of was the same impact that was basically on the rest of the population. They talked about having rations and that kind of stuff, but nothing earth-shaking that I can remember.

MG: Forgive me for jumping around the timeline a little bit, but things keep popping up that I’m interested in asking more about. What did your father's boxing career look like? Was he boxing for money? Who was he boxing? Did he run into people like Max Baer?

JC: This again was when he had run away from home, and he was bumming around the country on freight trains. Somebody told him you could make some money by boxing. You’d box, and you’d get paid a couple of bucks. He did that to make some money. Apparently, he was not that bad at it. He made it as far as the semifinals and then got disqualified. It turned out later on, by the way, that this boxing that he had done really showed up again in different places. I played around with my dad as a teenager, and I can still remember him; he would make a move, and I’d think my hands were going to go up and protect my head, and when I got my hands up, I noticed that his hands were right at my stomach. He didn’t hit me, but it would have been a disaster. He was telling me, one time, and they were organizing – the Ford workers – at, I think it was, Mahwah, New Jersey or down by West New York, New Jersey. The management at the time was not very pro-union. In fact, they were doing all sorts of things to make sure the unions didn’t get in, including “goon” squads. Dad was telling me that they were on strike; they would be on a picket line, and these guys would come up in cars and roll the windows down and spit at them and throw things at them and stuff. One of the tactics that was being used was to break up

these organizing meetings. Dad worked for – there were three guys that were big in the labor movement at that time; Walter Reuther was one of them. Sorry, my memory is not that good on the other two right now. But my dad worked for one of the other guys. He was told that he wanted – the guy wanted my father to go speak because my dad apparently was pretty decent at persuasion, and he wanted him to speak to the workers to get them to join the union. They would hold a meeting, and these “goon” squads would come in and try and disrupt the meeting. As the story goes, Dad started speaking, and these goons came in. They started a ruckus, and dad got right in the middle of it with his fists, and it ended up with a big melee. He got called in the next day. John Thomas, I think the guy’s name was. He said to my dad, “You’re the mouthpiece. You’re supposed to be talking. When you’re out there fighting, and they succeed in that, you haven’t done your job because you’re not getting the message over. I don’t want you to fight. You do the talking, okay?” My dad [said], “Well, what are we going to do when these guys do that?” He says, “These two guys are going to come with you from now on.” He said there were these two Swedish guys, and their job was to take the front bumpers of the cars as they came off the assembly line and put them onto something that took them out into the yard. These guys were huge. The next time they go to the meeting, the goon squads come in, and they’re going to start a fight. Dad’s getting ready to go again. One of these guys [the Swedish guys] grabs him by the collar, opens a door, and throws him out. [laughter] Then there’s a lot of noise, everything quiets down, and then they bring him back to finish the speaking. The boxing and what he learned as a boxer, apparently, stuck with him for quite some time.

MG: Do you know what made him come home eventually? Did something happen? Or was it just finally time?

JC: I think he had spent a couple of years. He was tired of running around. He met a guy – I think it was in California – whose name also was Callahan. The guy was older and was concerned because my father was so young. He managed to get the name and address of my dad’s father. He wrote him a letter and said, “Your son’s out here, and this is not a place to be. I’d like to bring him home.” That started up a communication. Apparently, my grandfather – I still have this letter my grandfather wrote to my father and told him that he could send him some money and he wanted him to come home. The letter I have a copy of – my father wrote back and said that was coming home but keep your money. I have my shoebox, and I can make all the nickels I need. That’s the way he was making money.

MG: Says something about the times.

JC: This other Callahan escorted my father back and actually ended up staying with the family for some time. It turned out that he was not such a good guy. But at any rate, that’s how my dad got home.

MG: You don’t have to tell me, but why wasn’t he such a good guy?

JC: One of my aunts told me that he was not a good guy.

MG: I understand. I’m fast-forwarding a little bit now. Your dad ended up in a career with a lighting company as a salesman. Do you know how he started there?

JC: Yes. Like I said, he did a lot of things, like I said, from selling fruit and stuff in the Depression. He did all sorts of odd jobs. He ended up being a salesman. When he finished high school, one of the things that was noted in his yearbook or something was that he was very, very good with speaking. I think it even said something about [how] he wanted to be a salesman. He started out in sales. At one point, I know he was going door to door with Electrolux vacuum cleaners. Then he was with a guy in a television store down in West New York, New Jersey, and he was selling TVs and appliances. Then he ended up working as a salesman for a lighting company called Luxor Lighting, part of the Duro-Test Corporation. He started out as a salesman there, where you would visit various stores and sell them light fixtures and stuff. It was commercial lighting. He moved up in sales. Apparently, he did very well. He got all sorts of awards as a top salesman, and he just kept progressing through the company. He ended up as the National Sales Director. He had a stroke right about the time that he was up for a – they were looking at a promotion. I remember having a conversation with him about that, and one of the things that he was lacking, if you will, was he didn't have a college education. The guy that got selected as the vice president had a college education. My dad thought that the reason he didn't get to be the vice president was because he didn't have that college education, which really reinforces my belief that he was just hell-bent on his kids having a college education. He ended up as the National Sales Director, and then, like I said, he had a stroke. He worked for a year or two afterward. He still was able to communicate with people, but at some point, started to lose the ability to communicate. He ended up retiring.

MG: Did your mother work outside the home after you and your sister were born?

JC: Not until we had gotten out of college. Then she went back to work. She was an executive secretary for a boiler company in New Jersey. When my dad had his second stroke, which was the one that essentially killed him, I remember him telling my mother, "Don't stop working." Because up until that point, he had been telling her, "You need to stop working. We can retire and move down to Toms River, New Jersey and spend a lot of time at the seashore." He was always trying to get her to do that. She kept saying, "Well, we'll do that next year." Then he said, "Don't stop working." He wanted her to have health insurance and the rest of that stuff.

MG: For how much longer did she continue to work after he passed away?

JC: She continued to work until she died of colon cancer. She never retired.

MG: I want to go back and ask how your dad got involved in politics.

JC: Good question. [laughter] His family were very diehard Democrats in New York. There was always a connection. When we lived in Hudson County, he was some kind of a Democratic Committeeman. We moved up to Bergen County; he actually ran for a mayor position in our town. He was the first Democrat to be elected in something like fifty years. I just heard a story from one of my cousins who had filmed my aunt talking about my dad and politics. She said that he and the guy that he was running with – they were kind of running as a team. Ed (Oljay) his name was. They would attend all of the functions that were going on in the town – various dances and stuff – to schmooze, if you will. Apparently, my dad, by the way, was an exceptional

dancer. He was really, really good. He and Ed (Oljay) would go to these things, and they would dance with all the women at these functions. They became known as the “Dancing Democrats,” and he won the election. When they won, the town council then elected the mayor. He got elected as mayor. Then, after he served as mayor, he became the police commissioner. After a couple of years of police commissioner, he became the director of public safety, which included the volunteer fire department. At one point, he also went – I think it was [John F.] Kennedy, who was running. We turned the TV on, and he was one of the Democratic representatives from Bergen County. He ended up sitting behind Mayor [Richard J.] Daley from Chicago. Every time we turned the TV on, you’d see coverage of the convention, there’s Mayor Daley, and there’s my dad sitting in the back. [laughter] When Kennedy came to speak up in Bergen County, I was playing football that day. We finished the game, and I still had my jersey on. My dad took me down – I think it was Hackensack. There was an armory there, and Kennedy was supposed to appear. We were standing outside; nobody could get into the armory. Dad was trying to figure out some way to get in. I was hungry, so I said, “You don’t mind if I go get something to eat?” He said, “No, go ahead.” I went across the street to grab something to eat. When I came back, he was gone. Finally, at some point, they opened up one of the gates, and I moved in with the crowd. I got up into the stands, and I was sitting at the end of a row. There was a banister to my left, and you could look down. That’s actually where Kennedy came in. I got to see him really close. When he got up to the dais to give a speech, I look, and there’s my dad sitting at the dais. Like I said, he was a Democratic politician. He knew people, and they had opened up a door. He waved to somebody, and they said, “Come on in, John,” and he ended up sitting up there. I was like, “Wow.”

MG: Did he have political aspirations beyond the local office?

JC: No. We had a conversation about that once in the dining area in our house. He said that he didn’t have the money to do that. He said, “If you’re going to run ...” In fact, he pointed to me. He said, “If you’re going to beat me, you got to become a congressman now.” That means you’re going to have to become a congressman. I shot back, “Well, why aren’t you going to do that?” “I don’t have the money. We don’t have the money to do that. It takes money to run for an office like that.”

MG: He was involved in politics during a really interesting time in the country’s history. This was around the time of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. Were these issues he tackled? Were they part of his campaign and platform?

JC: As far as civil rights were concerned, I don’t know. Let me think for a second. I know where he stood on it, and he was vehement about civil rights. There was nothing that came up in the local politics that I’m aware of that required any action, so I don’t recall any ordinances or anything like that being passed. But we had many, many conversations about unionism, civil rights, and as far as the Vietnam War was concerned, I was getting out of college right at that time – 1965. This Vietnam War thing was a big deal. He wanted to know what I was going to do. I said, “Well, I’m going to volunteer,” and all that sort of stuff. He just looked at me and said, “This is a bad war. This is a bad war.” He let me know – I don’t remember exactly the words – that this was not a war to be involved in. Meanwhile, I ended up getting selected as a potential Naval Reserve Officer. Having graduated from the Merchant Marine Academy, I was

going to sail merchant ships. I signed up on an ammunition ship going to Vietnam. He was not very happy about that either – “This is not something that you should be involved in.” Wasn’t going to stop me, but he wanted to let me know that he didn’t approve of that.

MG: I wanted to clarify. Did he serve as mayor in Washington Township? Is that correct?

JC: Yes.

MG: I was reading somewhere that the population in Washington Township during the 1960s really doubled in size. I didn’t know if that was something he dealt with, too, the population growth expanding so much, but a lot of these towns in New Jersey are geographically small.

JC: I don’t recall the population growth at that point. I know that the town had about four or five thousand people in it.

JC: I know that there were some, for example, crime issues. My mind is going crazy right now. He and I helped found the first Catholic Church that was there, Our Lady of Good Counsel. We went out and cut down trees and grass and helped them build this first church. That was due to population explosion. The other thing was, there were clubs that formed, including something called the swim club that he was instrumental in. They bought some property, made a swimming pool, and sold memberships to everybody. It was a place to go during the summer. This was all because there were so many more people coming into town. Crime went up a little bit. People would drop off the Garden State Parkway, and they would hit the local towns, rob them, get back onto the Garden State Parkway, and then take off. They were either coming from New York, or Newark, or Jersey City, more densely populated areas, but they had access to northern New Jersey, which is more of a bedroom community, and they could hop off the Garden State Parkway, do their dirty deed and get back on again. One of the things he did when he was police commissioner was he authorized another car, and they put the car right on the exit from the Garden State Parkway all night – just parked there. The crime rate in our town went down substantially just from that one little thing, and it went up in the town next to us because they would just go to the next exit and get off. [laughter]

MG: Did you follow his career closely, or were you busy with other things?

JC: Oh, no. I always wondered what he was doing and why he was doing it. I had a lot of conversations with him on what it was like to be a salesman and how he became successful at that. How did he become successful in a lot of the other things? He had some pretty interesting insights, at least [to] me. One of them was that – he told me a story one time about going into a store and telling the guy, “Well, we have these lights. They’re great.” The guy said, “Well, what I need them for is this,” and he showed dad the display of shoes in the front window. My dad looked at it and said, “Well, I can’t help you with that because the kind of [lights] we have wouldn’t do justice to your shoes. What you need is this kind of a light. We don’t sell it, but this other company does. That’s where you probably ought to go to get those lights.” Now, Dad had told me that – a long time ago – if you’re going to sell something, based on his experience, you had to, first of all, really know the product and the field, and number two, you really had to be committed that this was the best product on the market. What you were doing as a salesman

was you're not selling something; you're providing a service, and that service includes advice as to what the best solution is. That's what he did for the guy. He told him, "The best solution is not me; it's somebody else." A month later, he got a callback. The guy wanted other lights for other parts in the store and gave him this incredibly large order – just *boom*. And that happened a lot because the people that he dealt with trusted him. He wasn't out just to sell them a product; he was out to take care of their needs. I think that's what made him so successful.

MG: I'm curious now about your childhood and your experience growing up. What are some of your earliest memories?

JC: The one that just immediately came to mind was growing up in West New York, New Jersey. At that time, it was like living in New York City. You didn't go beyond one block from where you lived. We lived at 6401 Boulevard East. The kids from 64th Street didn't go and play with the kids from 65th Street because if you went to 65th Street, you were probably going to get beat up. [laughter] We went to Boy Scout meetings as a group for defense. We walked five blocks to school. My sister and I – I was always escorting her back and forth. You didn't stop on the way. You went up to school. There was a little candy store next to the school. You could hang out there a little bit, but you didn't want to stop in that four blocks between home and school. I went to St. Joseph's Grammar School, and the first day I went – I guess it was kindergarten or first grade; I can't remember which – my friend and I – (Jimmy Moore) – thought it was a really great deal to be in the schoolyard and playing with everybody, and that was fun. Then, the nuns came out with their habits and those big clunky rosary beads and let us in. We had to hold hands with your partner and walk into the school. [laughter] I can still smell the – what is that powder? – talcum powder smell. All of a sudden, we were going to be in a room, and we weren't outside playing anymore. Jimmy and I decided, "No, we didn't like that." So, we left. [laughter] We walked home. At that time, you weren't allowed to cross the street by yourself. You would have to wait on the street for an adult to come by and say, "Would you cross us?" We crossed five streets, came home, and then I went up and knocked on the door, and my mother answered. I said, "I want something to eat," or whatever. She said, "What are you doing here?" [laughter] She took me back to school. It was probably then that I associated education [with] being what my mother would love me for.

MG: Did you ever attempt playing hooky again?

JC: I did a couple of times in my career do some hooky-playing, but not then, no. The dressing down I got from my parents convinced me that I should definitely make sure that I'm in school. Other memories? We lived in an apartment building, and again, my friend Jimmy and I found, under one of the main staircases – there were no elevators; there were staircases, and we lived on the third floor- That they stored screens underneath one of the stairways at the ground level. We found this place, and it was like a secret cave. We would meet in the secret cave. We decided that we needed light. I got some newspapers and a match. We made torches, and it was really, really cool being in this underground cave with these torches, not realizing, of course, that the smoke was coming out the little doorway, and everybody thought the house was burning down. The next thing we know, the fire department was there, breaking in with two kids sitting there with these torches. [laughter] My father came home from work just in time to see the firemen and the police escorting us out. Dad, being the persuader that he was, talked to them. I ended up

sitting at the front window – I remember that this was my punishment – watching everybody else play. I had to take a box full of matches and light them one by one over the sink to get that out of me. Then I just sat there and watched kids play for a week. That was the first time that they rescued me. Second was, there was a vacant lot on the next street. Every Saturday, people would put out anything big they had for the garbage pickup. We found a mirror. We put the mirror in the lot, and we start throwing lots of rocks at it to break it. Some guy on the corner with his little dog called us to stop. We said some profanities and said, “No.” Turns out the guy was a cop. He called, and the police came. This time, my dad came home – or he was home. He was crossing the street to go to my uncle Frank’s grocery store. Here comes a cop car with me in the back. He flags him down. I heard about that one, too.

MG: I’m curious about the neighborhood where you lived. You mentioned each block was pretty insular. Was there a particular ethnic makeup? Were a lot of other Irish Catholic families in the neighborhood?

JC: There were Irish and Italian, and pretty much nobody else. Across the street from us was a grocery store that I just mentioned. The guy that ran it was Frank DeLuca, and he was my “Uncle” Frank. You didn’t call them by their name. They were close enough that he had to have a name. He was “Uncle” Frank. The local barber was a very close friend of my dad and mother. He was Joe Gansi. He was “Uncle” Joe. We would get together for dinners. The Italian influence on my mother was amazing in terms of cooking because all of the Italian wives – Uncle Joe Gansi’s wife and Irene De Luca – would teach her how to cook all these Italian foods, sauces, and all that sort of stuff. I can remember – wow, I can remember going back on Sundays to Uncle Frank’s house for dinner, and it was an all-day affair. It was not just sit down and eat; you had antipasto, you went out and played, you came back, and you had regular pasta. You went out and played, came back, [and] there was chicken. It was this series of meals that went all day. We would go out and play. The adults would sit there and drink wine and play cards and all sorts of stuff. I remember Uncle Frank at one point after dinner – and this happened a lot in my life when I was a kid, by the way. It was amazing. Stuff would happen that I had no concept that this was going to happen, and all of a sudden, there it was. It made me think twice about what you think about people when you just look at them. You know? In preparation for this [interview], I’ve been looking at a lot of stuff from NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration]. I found the autograph book that I had in grammar school, and my Uncle Frank wrote something in it. He said, “Best of luck,” or whatever – “Frank, the Crank.” That’s how he signed it. I looked at him as this loud-mouth, rough-and-tumble kind of guy that probably didn’t have a lot of talent doing anything except slicing meat in the grocery store. We’re at Uncle Frank’s house for dinner, and he disappears into the bedroom. He wants to listen to this radio program that he liked to listen to. All of a sudden, I hear this music, and it’s classical violin stuff. I’m going, “Wow, that’s really weird. Uncle Frank likes classical stuff?” I said something to my dad about it. He said, “Open the door and look.” My Uncle Frank was with a violin, playing along with the radio. He was amazing. Absolutely amazing. Let’s see. What else? It was Irish-Italian. In fact, one of the first girls I ever fell in love with was Gabriella something-or-other, who lived two houses up – an Italian lady. Maybe that was the first time I’d ever heard any kind of concern about staying within your own group. Like, “There’s a lot of Irish ladies out there, you know? Don’t you find them fun or whatever?” Following on with that, by the way, again with my dad, because he did not put up with any of that kind of crap.

When we moved into Washington Township, they started an Italian-Irish softball game every year; it was a picnic. What they would do is all of the Italian guys would come in old cars with pipes sticking out the window like they were Tommy guns, and they had fedoras and all that stuff. The Irish guys would show up dressed like leprechauns. Then they'd have a softball game. The softball would be – somebody would paint a melon white, and they would lob that in, the guy would hit it, and it would splatter. All the families would have a picnic afterward. There was a lot of camaraderie between the Irish and the Italians from West New York all the way through my high school area.

MG: You mentioned that you and your father built the first Catholic Church in Washington Township. Was going to church a big part of your life growing up?

JC: Oh, yes. Every Sunday. Absolutely. Yes, definitely. You didn't miss church. In fact, I ended up – my dad was selling lights to the rector of Don Bosco High School up in Ramsey, New Jersey. That's when we heard about Don Bosco. He talked to the priest up there about getting me into Don Bosco. It was shortly after that that we moved from West New York, New Jersey, to Washington Township, New Jersey because I was going to start high school. He wanted to make sure that I got a good education. A Catholic education, at that time, was good, was really good. It was an all-boys school, and that's where I ended up going to high school. But religion was always a big part – midnight mass Christmas, Easter. I can remember, as a kid, at that point, you had to fast for like twelve hours or something before you received communion. At that time, I guess my blood sugar content was not appropriate for that, and so on a day like Easter or Christmas, where there was a lot of excitement, and you were burning off whatever sugar you had, I would go to church, and I'd faint, waiting for the communion. The doctor said, "Yeah, give him some cookies in the middle of the night before; it'll take care of it." I became an altar boy. I became the president of the Catholic Youth Organization when we were living in Washington Township. I went to a Catholic grammar school. My dad would have to go up to the nuns every year because I was being a bad boy. They'd send home and want to see him. The reason was because I was disturbing the class. I look back at it now, and I realize exactly what was going on. At that time, they didn't have any kind of special programs for anybody; everybody was in the same room. I loved history and some of the other stuff, and I would read the history books and some of the other stuff that I enjoyed within the first few days, and then I was bored. I looked for ways to relieve my boredom, which included cutting up. The nun would send home and say, "We want to talk to your parents," and dad would come up and talk to them. The next day, invariably, the nun would say, "I just spoke to Mr. Callahan. What a wonderful guy." Blah, blah, blah. Of course, he'd come back and tell me, "You're going to do this or that." They loved him, with one exception. In the seventh grade, I got slapped by one of the nuns, and I told my parents about it. They wanted to know why that happened. Because corporal punishment, regardless of what the rumors are, was a rare thing. He went up to talk to the nun, and the nun explained what I was doing. Dad let her finish, and then he said, "All right, from now on, if my son does anything like this, I would like you to write a note home, and I will take care of it. Don't you ever touch him again." It was the first time my father ever defended me. He took me by the hand, and he went right over to the church. He knew the priest, Father Fitzpatrick, and he said, "I just had a conversation with this particular nun. She struck him out of anger. That's inappropriate for corporal punishment. I told her not to touch him again. I will handle that if it's necessary." And he did, and I did get slapped. [laughter]

MG: On the one hand, he defended you, but on the other hand, he still punished you.

JC: Well, he didn't punish me for that. But sure enough, I got a note to take home, [laughter] and I got a little paddling on the fanny once. That was interesting because my mother told me later on – she said, “Your father did not like to do that. And he has told me he's never going to do that again. But you just watch your P's and Q's.”

MG: I think on your pre-interview survey, you said you had a number of relatives who lived on the East Coast. Did you have family nearby?

JC: Yes. Now, I look at them as within striking distance. But I didn't have a car. We lived in West New York, New Jersey, and later Washington Township, New Jersey. When my Dad's family moved from Brooklyn, New York, they settled in Paterson, New Jersey. His three sisters eventually married. One, Janet, lived first in Fort Lee, New Jersey, then moved back to Paterson and later to Long Island, New York. One, Sadelle, moved to Paramus, New Jersey, and later to Glen Rock, New Jersey. The third, Alice, stayed in Paterson, New Jersey. These towns were relatively close to us. They'd visit, but it wasn't like you'd see them on a daily basis or anything. But for me, as a teenager without a car, it wasn't close. I would get to see them once in a while.

MG: What precipitated the move to Washington Township?

JC: We were in West New York, New Jersey, until I was thirteen. That is right across the river from New York City, near Union City, Weehawken, that area. A couple of things happened. The neighborhood was really going downhill. The night we left, there was a gang fight on the corner of Boulevard East and 64th Street, and some kid lost his eye. So, some gang activity, if you will. Like I said, we used to go to Boy Scout meetings, which by the way, my father had volunteered to be a scoutmaster of. I'm rambling. He volunteered because the troop that the church sponsored was too full, and they needed another troop. He volunteered to be the scout leader, and we started a new troop. He got up to give a speech the first night, and he said he wanted to go from Eagle to Tenderfoot, which is exactly the opposite from what you're supposed to do. He knew nothing about scouting. Nothing. A year and a half later, I was sitting in church, watching him go up to receive the national camping award for our troop. But at any rate, the neighborhood was going down. He had finally gotten a decent wage as a salesman with his lighting company. He wanted to move the family out of West New York and give us some more room. I was thirteen years old. My sister was seven. We were sleeping in the same room, and they were still sleeping on a foldout couch in the living room. That [transpired], and he found a place. We went up. I remember going up with him and painting and having all his sisters and family come over and scraping wallpaper off. We ended up with a three-bedroom house in Washington Township, New Jersey.

MG: What was that like for the family to go from a three-room apartment to a three-bedroom home?

JC: We were in seventh heaven. This is like, “Wow.” We had trees in the backyard. Wow, that's amazing – trees. We had a front lawn, which I'd end up cutting, so that wasn't too good.

But it was like a whole different world. It was like we moved into the sticks. It was great. It was wonderful. My sister might have had a little bit more of a rough time, but she loved the house. She loved not being in West New York. But she was in fourth grade or something like that when we moved. It was a little more difficult for her. When we moved, I had just graduated from grammar school, and I was just starting high school. So, [for me], not a big deal.

MG: What was your experience at Don Bosco like? Were you involved in clubs or activities there?

JC: Yes, I was. I played in the band. I played football. In fact, we had the first varsity squad in the history of the school, and I was on that team. We didn't do too well. I think our last season, my senior year, I think we had a winning record. But up until that point, we weren't doing too good. My nephew told me a couple of years ago – he said, “Have you been watching Don Bosco's football?” “No.” He said, “You know, they're the National Champions. It's the second year in a row.” I told my nephew, “Yes, well, I started that.” [laughter] We had a drama club. I remember being in a play. It [the school] was taught by the Salesians. The Salesians have this philosophy, I guess, where they are going to play with you. They come down to your level, athletically, and they become your friends. Then, they're your teachers. But there's a boundary. Each one of them had some unique kind of talent. I remember one of the brothers; he had the fastest hands I've ever seen. He would play this game where you hold your hands out, and then somebody puts their hands on top of yours, and then you're supposed to slap their hands with your hand. Nobody could beat him. At lunchtime, we'd walk around – the place had a campus; it was really neat. It had a little lake and a football field, and it had been built on a property that had some apple orchards. We had a place to walk around and stuff. These brothers would come out; they'd play basketball with you. If you wanted to box, Brother Carr was a Golden Gloves champion. They had all these things, right? But you didn't mess around with them at all. It was one of those things, where – I'll give you an example. One of my classmates, one of the football guys that I was with, took up boxing and was doing boxing lessons and stuff. One of the English teachers had given him a bad grade. As the English teacher and another guy were walking around the track by the lower football field, this guy said to him, “Hey, Mr. Gannon, come on, put the gloves on. Let's go for a couple of rounds here.” The teacher, wanting to be a nice guy and all, did that. My classmate really stood the guy up for twenty minutes. He just beat him up. Not bloody or anything, but he really beat him up. The next day, again, the guy's out there with his boxing gloves and trying to find people to spar with, and here comes Joe Hughes, one of the other teachers. The guy says to Joe Hughes, “How are you doing, Mr. Hughes?” Joe Hughes looks at him and says, “I understand you do some boxing and stuff.” He says, “Yeah, you want to try me?” He says, “Yeah. Okay, fine.” Hughes puts his gloves on. For the next thirty minutes, this kid got his ass handed to him. The reason was that Joe Hughes, to make money on the side, was a professional sparring partner. The deal was if you wanted to challenge a teacher, you could challenge them – a brother, a priest – you could challenge them physically. If you won, you'd go to the next one. When you got to the very top, which was Father Al Sokol (Big Al) – if you managed to get past Al Sokol, you got thrown out of school. It was not productive.

MG: How long did this system last?

JC: It's still going on. When I say it's still going on, I mean the Salesians are still teaching at Don Bosco in Ramsey, New Jersey. It's one of the premier high schools in New Jersey. They have something ridiculous, like a ninety-eight percent college admission rate. They publish some stuff now about the number of scholars that come out of it. It's actually phenomenal, really good. This method that they have of being – I'm sure they've modified stuff given today's social norms. But, I think that's one of the things about a parochial school system, regardless of whether it's Catholic or not, that has a little bit of an edge on public education because they can choose who their students are in a way. They have no problem getting rid of a bad apple if they can't change it, not necessarily the case in a public system, where they can't do that kind of stuff. That's my take.

MG: This was an all-boys school.

JC: Yes. Yes, it was.

MG: Were you able to meet girls and go on dates during high school?

JC: The school was twelve miles away. Dating was confined to my friends at Westwood High School and getting invited to parties on weekends, and you meet people that way. Once in a while, they would have a dance with an all-girls Catholic high school or something like that. But mostly, it was you got to meet people in your local area in the local high schools and stuff.

MG: What classes were you finding you really enjoyed or excelled in during this time period?

JC: Well, good question. I got very good marks in liberal arts stuff, stuff having to do with science, like chemistry, math, not so good, which is really funny because I ended up going to an engineering college. [laughter]

MG: Did you have any teachers that were particularly influential during high school or that served as mentors to you?

JC: Mentors? No, they didn't do that kind of mentoring thing. I can remember some of them as really – Father Bajorek was an English teacher. He got really incensed one day. He gave us a passage from Shakespeare to read. We came back the next day, and he started questioning us about it. It was like, "What is this crap?" That was the attitude that we evinced if you will. He was flabbergasted. He was very upset. He had a bald head that he shaved. His nickname was "Chrome Dome." So, "Chrome Dome" said, "You understand what's going on here?" And we all [groaned]. He said, "Listen," and then he went, and he read the passages from Shakespeare the way it was supposed to be read. And it was like, "Wow, what a difference. That actually makes sense, and it's interesting." We queried him about that, and his response was, "If you spent the rest of your lives, your natural lives reading just the classics, you'd still have a bunch to go by the time you die, so why do you want to read garbage? You should be reading stuff like this." It just stuck with me so much after that. I was like, "Absolutely correct." To this day, I have a hard time reading stuff that's just fiction. Anyway, to this day, I don't do a lot of reading fiction. If it's fiction that I'm reading, it's going to be the classic stuff. That's something that stuck with me. The other ones? The other ones were all mashed together. They all had good

stuff. Once in a while, there were a couple of losers, but they were generally pretty good. They all had some kind of influence.

MG: During your senior year, what were you thinking about in terms of going to college? What did you think you wanted to do and pursue?

JC: Yes, that was really interesting. I had been told by a number of people, including one or two of the priests up there, that I ought to consider going into law. I guess that was because, in a religion class, I would always question them. They would come up with things like, "The priest is supposed to be the only person that marries you." Then I'd say, "Well, what if you're on a desert island, and there's no priest, and you really love this woman?" [laughter] At any rate, I applied to something like four liberal arts colleges for law programs. Each time, it was like fifty or sixty dollars an application, which drove my parents insane. I was waiting to hear back from these colleges, and a friend of my dad came over to our house and talked to my dad and said, "I was in the Merchant Marine. Have you ever thought about any of the service academies like Annapolis or West Point or Kings Point?" Dad said, "No, tell me about it." He said, "Well, for one thing, it's free." My dad's ears perked up. I don't know how it happened, but again, dad was a Democrat, and Adlai Stevenson was still playing around. For all I know, Dad worked on his campaign or something, but I ended up with appointments to take the exams for Annapolis and West Point. The problem was that I had waited until June or July or something to even think about this stuff. It would have been a whole year before I could take the exams. Then the question is, well, what do you do for that year? This friend said to my dad, "Well, why don't you let him go to either the United States Merchant Marine Academy or Fort Schuyler, which is the State University of New York Maritime College. At the end of the first year, if he still wants to go to West Point or Annapolis, he'll be sitting pretty; he'll have a year under his belt. On the other hand, if he doesn't, he can just continue, and he will get a good education. Again, it's essentially free." I checked around, and my high school football coach said that he would recommend me to Kings Point to get a scholarship for football. Again, their class had already been selected. What was left was Fort Schuyler. My dad dragged me into the car reluctantly. "Come on. We're going to go over and see Fort Schuyler." "I don't want to go." "Come on, let's go." We went over, and I looked around – guys walking around in uniforms and stuff. "Yeah. Pretty nice." I love uniforms. "So, what do you think, John?" "Yeah, that sounds good." The next thing I knew, I applied to Fort Schuyler and got accepted. Little did I know that that was going to steer me down a path, which would lead right here to this interview. [laughter]

MG: I wonder if that's a good place to stop for today because I know you have to get going.

JC: I wanted to tell you, by the way, I got accepted into all four of those programs for pre-law.

MG: Did you have to make a tough decision at some point, or had you already decided on Fort Schuyler at that point?

JC: I'd like to say I made the decision. But really, my dad was the prime driver. The fact that there was a uniform involved was the selling point to me, rather. And the fact that it was not going to cost them anything was really paramount in the decision to go to Fort Schuyler. I just came across a letter from my dad that I didn't even know I had. He wrote it to me on my first

cruise from Fort Schuyler. Every summer, we would take our training ship and go to Europe. He wrote to me: "Dear son, I'm very proud of you. I hope you're having a good time. Your mom and I are fine. You're doing things that I could only dream of." It struck something in me. Wow. I'd forgotten that I even had this letter and that it said that. But I was doing stuff that he could only dream of, and he was so envious, and he wished I was home.

MG: They must have been really proud.

JC: He was. He really was.

MG: When you visited Fort Schuyler, did you get a tour? Did you learn about the college's history? Wasn't it once a prison for Confederate soldiers?

JC: No, it was more, "This is what the cadet corps is like. You understand, of course, that you're going to be restricted to school grounds during the week. You're going to have to wear a uniform. You're going to have to do this. You're going to have to do that. You understand all that stuff?" Nothing about the confederacy or the fact that – did you know that Fort Schuyler was only fired on once?

MG: No, I didn't know that.

JC: There was another fort that was built directly across the East River called Fort Totten. Those two forts were supposed to defend New York City from an invasion up through Long Island Sound and then down through the East River. During – I think it was – World War Two, a ship – and I should know this because I had to write an article for the Fort Schuyler newspaper on it. A ship came up and was not flying its colors properly. They were instructed to fly their colors and to identify themselves, and they didn't right away. Fort Totten fired a shot across their bow, which hit the water like a rock skipping, came off the water, and hit Fort Schuyler.

MG: No one was injured?

JC: No. No one was injured. Fort Schuler was built [with] granite that was sailed by clipper ship down from New England, where you are.

MG: Neat.

JC: It would take an awful lot to get through that stuff. Those blocks are really, really big.

MG: Yes, it's a neat campus. It's an interesting place.

JC: Have you been there?

MG: I've just seen pictures of it.

JC: Yes, it really was amazing. It's a pentagon. There's a French guy that designed it, and there are just a number of them throughout the States. But this is a really good example. You can't

get at it. If you were going to attack it, you have to come across a spit of land from the Bronx. They had a little outer gorge to defend against that. Then you had the five-sided fort with little parapets coming out. You could very easily defend it. Interestingly enough, now, it's more administrative offices and museums and stuff like that. When I was there, we actually ate meals there. We had classes in the fort itself, and we lived on a training ship because we didn't have dorms.

MG: Is there anything I'm missing up to this point?

JC: Let me think for a second. My parents wanted the best for me and my sister. Nobody in our family had a college education. I was the first one accepted to college. They spent a lot of time to make sure that my sister and I were well and had every advantage. I mentioned my dad volunteering to become a scoutmaster because I wanted to join the Boy Scouts, and the troop was full. That was the kind of stuff that he did. Again, I just came across memorabilia from 1957 for the jamboree in Valley Forge. We sent an entire patrol from our troop to the national jamboree. This was the kind of stuff that he did. I feel thankful. I'm so thankful, and I think my sister is also very thankful that our parents thought enough about us to dedicate a large portion of their existence to making sure that we were in good hands and had every advantage, regardless of how we fought them on it.

MG: It sounds like your dad made use of every hour in a day, as well.

JC: He did. If anything, he spent a lot of time at night after the job, doing his politicking in the Knights of Columbus and all sorts of stuff. I never did get to talk to my mother about how that affected her. Of course, she was home with us.

MG: Would you have discussions about politics around the dinner table? Was your mother similarly politically aligned?

JC: My mother ended up in Washington Township as a Democratic Committee Woman. Yes, absolutely. She was more of the listener than she was the speaker. When we discussed politics, dad would be doing most of the speaking. In reality, he would be doing most of the listening. I would take off – just one last example here. I was working downtown [New York City] at M. Rosenblatt and Son as a naval architect right when I finished college. I had to ride the subway, so I would commute down from Northern New Jersey, through the Port Authority, and then downtown to Wall Street, where this firm was located. At the time – I forget who the mayor was in New York; it might have been [John] Lindsay – there was a big strike going on, involving subway engineers. They were striking because they wanted more money. I was railing against the fact that I was only making three dollars and twenty-five cents an hour as a graduate engineer, and these guys were looking at fifteen dollars an hour or whatever the difference was; it was substantial. I said, "I have a college education. I don't get this. And now they're going on strength, and they're padding their retirement by getting all this overtime for the last couple of years that they're there." I was convinced I was absolutely correct in this, right? Dad listened to that whole stuff, and he said, "Well, how many years do you think they spent becoming an engineer on the train?" I said, "Well, I don't know." He said, "Well, probably around this many years. Where do they work?" "Well, they work in the tubes?" "What's the condition down

there, the air and that kind of good stuff?" He would just go through all these things about why these guys do need medical benefits, why they do need a substantial retirement, etcetera. He would just listen, and then he would explain to you why this was so. It never ceased to amaze me that he knew the why's. A lot of people just talk; they don't have anything to back it up, but he would know.

MG: It sounds like you learned a lot from him.

JC: I did. I did.

MG: I think this is a good place to stop. I know you have to get to your friend.

JC: Molly, you're very good at this.

MG: Well, so are you. You're making my job very easy.

JC: I really enjoy talking. As you're speaking, stuff's just going in the head.

MG: I love that about the oral history process. Old memories come to the fore as we talk, and it's really interesting to see what pops up. This has been a lot of fun. I really want to thank you for your time so far. You've given me a lot to think about and look forward to next time.

JC: Thank you, Molly.

MG: All right. Thank you. Talk to you soon.

JC: Okay. Bye-bye.

MG: Bye-bye.

JC: Have a good day.

MG: You too.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 8/10/2021

Reviewed by John K. Callahan, Jr. 10/13/2021

Reviewed by Molly Graham 10/20/2021

Reviewed by John K. Callahan, Jr. 11/09/2021

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