

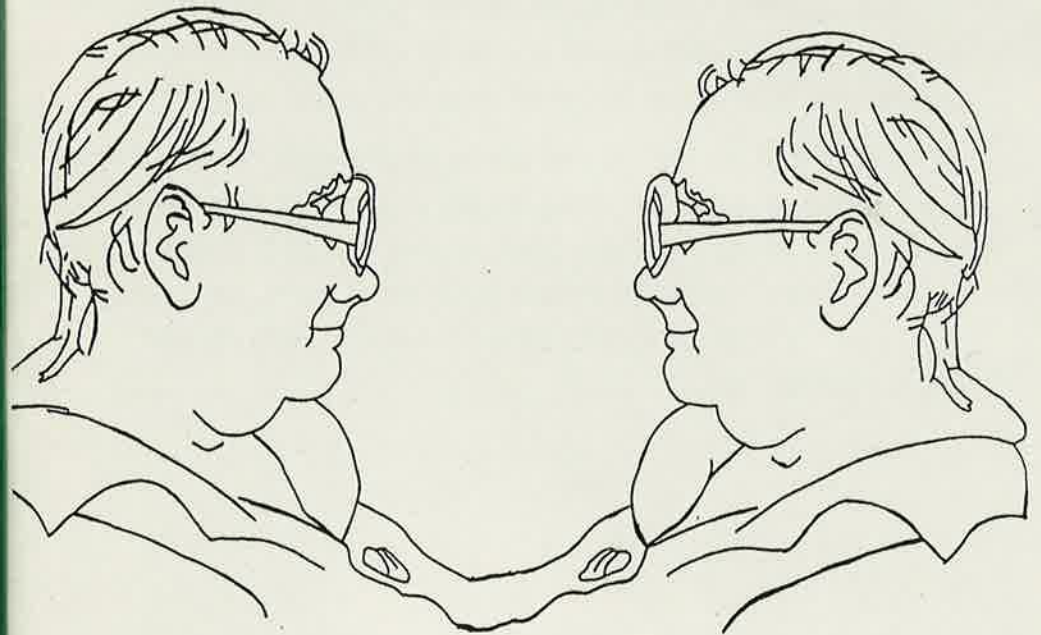
# Looking Back

by

**Joe Flanagan**

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO MY LIFE STORY

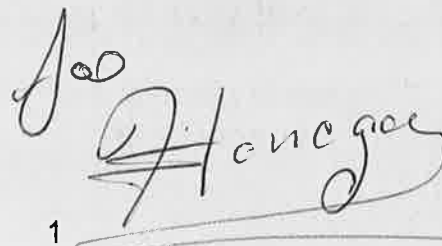
I believe everyone should write something about their life, what it was like growing up in their days, specially if they come from another Country I'm Irish myself.

I always wanted to write my life story for my children, but I could never find the time. But by the time my grandchildren came along I knew I had to do something about it.

To my wife I'm her husband, to my children I'm their father, to my grandchildren I'm their grandfather. I think that is true of most families. But I would like my family to know the other side of me, the inner person if you like. As long as I can remember a voice in my head keep pulling me one way and I want to go another way. This is why it takes me so long to finish anything I start. My hands won't work with my brain.

I have written many parts of my life story since 1982, there are still many more parts to write. I might have to leave it to my grandchildren to finish or maybe their children, they may do a better job then me. They might make a couple of bob out of it.

Joe Flanagan - 1997

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joe Flanagan". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

## TO HAVE A FUTURE YOU MUST HAVE PAST

I was born on the 19th of March 1930, in the Lying-In Hospital in Limerick City in Ireland. My Mother's name was Mary Doherty. She came from a part of Limerick called Palmerstown. She lived there with her parents, her two brothers Thomas and Michael and her two sisters Nora and Kathleen.

I never knew my Mother's parents. My father, Joe Flanagan, lived in 6 Whites Lane with his parents, his two brothers Paddy and Christy and his two sisters May and Cissie and their husbands, Tom Ryan and Jim Hoolihan and their two children, as well as my father, mother, my brother Sean and myself.

Altogether they would be 12 or 13 people living in a three bed house. I can remember my father's mother wearing a black shawl. Most women wore black in shawls in them days. There was 10 houses on each side of the lane with 10 or more people living in each house. They were always cold and damp. There was nothing good about them days, not for our parents

anyway. They were the ones that had to make ends meet, put food on the table, clothes on your back, little things like that. Us kids on the other hand we had a world of our own and why not? Behind our house there was some derelict houses that was our playground.

It was everything and anything we wanted it to be. Have kids changed so much today? I hope not. My young days was some of the happiest days of my life.

#### A STONES THROW A WAY

On the top of the lane was the main road Dominic Street. There was a kiosk shop on the side of road. Across from the kiosk was a cinema called the Lyric. Before going to the Lyric we would go to the kiosk for sweets. There would be about 5 of us. While two of us was trying to make up our minds what we where going to spend our pennies on, the rest of us would be pinching a few sweets when the shopkeeper wasn't looking. Happy days.

On the other side of the road there was a church, we used to go to every Sunday. In the middle of the road there was a clock with railings around. It was the meeting place for the boys and girls that grew up around it. We used to sit there for hours talking about what we were going to do when we grew up. But what we didn't know was that life was to play a part in our plans.

When we grew up we all went our way We had to grow up fast in them days, we didn't have much time to be young. We had to go out to work as soon as we could to help to keep the family. I went to work when I was 12. I often think of them days and wonder if the boys and girls I grew up with ever think of the happy days we had around the clock, I would like to think so.

I look back on them days with pride. 30 years later I went back home. I went to see the clock just to recall memories of happy days. The clock was still there but the railings was gone. There was tears in

my eyes, as I walked away. Another 30 years has passed, the clock is still there, but in place of the railings there are memories of happy days.

The clock is the only thing left to remind me I passed this way. When I sat at the clock I can see the faces of the boys and girls I grew up with. I can almost hear us talk, like we did all them years ago. But when I leave the clock all the names and faces are just gone. If the clock could talk what a tale it could tell. Together what a story we could write. You might say the clock is my Cenotaph.

#### THE LONG DARK HALL

The only light coming into the hall was from the street light, but we had to leave the door open. We used to be at the back of the hall under the stairs just sting there no room to sit down or for anything else either. Outside it was cold and raining but in the hall we were warm and dry. We could see anyone coming in but they couldn't see us.

There was two sisters, Mary and Theresa who lived up stairs with their parents.

Their father had a limp, he tried to come down quietly to catch us but he could never make it. Fathers was very over protective about their daughters in them days, more so then, than they are to day I suppose. And maybe they didn't think very much about us anyway. Or maybe they thought we knew more about sex than they did, and we might tell them about it, I don't know. We never got to know any of the girls' fathers. If we met one of them in the street we would cross over to the other side, we were afraid we might get a crack across the ear-hole just for knowing their daughters.

Growing up was an education in them days. But our parents knew if we wasn't at the clock we would be in the hall. If one of our parents came looking for one of us, it was always your mother that came looking for you. That was her job. She would stand at the door, call you name and you better answer her.



You couldn't pretend you wasn't there. Your friends would start sneering, and then you would be in trouble. She would grab you by the ear-hole, pull you down the street saying, "Wait until I get you home and we see what your father has to say about it!" She never told him, she knew he would take the skin off of you, that was his job.

That was the way he was reared up and he would tell you it didn't do him any harm. But it did. His family was afraid of him. He was the head of the house and he answered to no one. It was only when my eldest was born my father and me got on. Up until that time we wasted 30 years of our lives. Sometimes it hurts looking back, but sometimes you have to, to learn from it and to be sure that history doesn't repeat itself where your family is concerned. Sometimes looking back can help you to make a better future for you and your family.

## SEX

We didn't know anything about sex, we thought the stork brought the babies. We thought every time we kissed a girl we would put her in the family way.

We might have enjoyed it, but we still didn't know what it was all about. But we did know the price we would have to pay if we did put a girl in the family way. Our parents and relatives, not forgetting the priest, would come down on us like a ton of bricks. They would have us at the altar before we could scratch our head after all that.

We would have to live with one of our parents or relatives, and they never let you forget it. If you lived with your parents or relatives they would blame her. If you lived with her parents or relatives they would blame you. Even if you loved each other you would have a hard time. If you wasn't working, Heaven help you. If you had a child that didn't live or a child that was disfigured in anyway it would be God punishing you for being bad. They always put the fear of God

into the poor and uneducated, but the rich and powerful, that was another matter. They gave their workers a hard time, they made them work all hours for very little wages. We were always looking over our shoulder waiting for God to punish us for something we may or may not have done, even if you'd pinched a few apples.

Everything was a challenge for my generation. We challenged our parents and our relatives, not forgetting the Priest and the Nuns. Everyone older than us was authority and we had to challenge them. We might have been shitting ourselves while we were doing it, but we had to do something. We felt as if we were tied down. We had to break away somehow.

Times was very hard, and harder still for our parents generation and for their parents generation, and it was time for a change. I like to think my generation played a part in bringing some changes. The Priest and the Nuns kept my generation and my parents

generation down. Every time they spoke to you it was as if it came straight from God. That was the kind of power they had over you, and they didn't want to let go. Superstition is a very hard thing to break away from. I think every one is Superstitious even today.

When I try to tell my family what it was like when I was growing up they said 'That was 100 years ago Dad'. And maybe it was, but the passing of one generation must be important to the next generation, because it's a part of their part of history, specially if one of their parents came from another Country, Sooner or later everyone wants to know about their roots. When the day comes when my family, or their family want to know about their roots, I hope what I'm writing will be there to help them.

## NEW HOUSING ESTATE

I never liked the housing estate we moved to, so as soon as I could I found my way back to where I felt at home, back to the part of town where I was born.

It was like being born again. It was where I was belonged. It's where I had 10 mothers and fathers to look after me. That is the kind of people they were in them days.

Because I lived on the other side of the City I didn't have to go home for my meals. Whichever one of my friends I was with at meal time, that is where I had my meal. If my friend's father or mother hit him for being in trouble, they would hit me just as hard because I was with them at the time. Happy days. From time to time I think about them days and feel proud I had so many fathers and mothers to look after me. How lucky can one be in one's life-time. I spent most of my time growing up in Dominic Street with the boys and girls I knew and their families, that is what it was like in them days.

## SHY

We boys were very shy in them days. But we got on very well with the girls we grew up with. They were a part of our little world and I suppose it was the same for the boys and girls in other parts of the City.

We met them at the pictures and we got on very well, and then they went back to their little world, and we went back our little world, where we felt safe and secure. But the time was coming when we would have to leave our little world and go out to a bigger world we didn't know anything about. It's called growing up, finding out about life like it or like it not. I'm 67 now and I'm still learning about life. I had to change my way of looking at life with my children, and now my grandchildren.

## GETTING BACK TO MY STORY

The fair used to come to our part of City two or three or times a year, we looked on it as our domain, boys and girls came from all the City. We kept our eyes open for any trouble, I think we felt they were

trespassing. I think we were jealous that they would pay attention to the girls we grew up with. But we paid attention to the girls that were them, and girls that came from other areas, and maybe we would forget the girls we grew up with. Yes things and times was about to change and there nothing we could have done about it.

#### OUR INTRODUCTION, MEETING STRANGE GIRLS

All girls in them days used to wear scarves tied with a small knot under the chin. It was tied in such a way when you pulled it, it came off. The girls knew one of the boys was going to take her scarf. It was all harmless fun in them days. Today they would say 'Your place or mine?' How things have changed.

After getting the girls scarf you would see her home, maybe see her the next night at the fair. Even in my days girls played hard to get, but you made new friend. Although it was only a penny to go to the pictures you couldn't afford to treat a girl, so you had

to meet her inside, because you needed that penny to meet your friends the next night in another cinema, it was like a tradition to be with your friends. If the girls could play hard to get, why couldn't we.

Another way to get to know girls was sit behind them in the pictures. There was long benches in the picture house, it was always the same group of girls sitting in the same place. Even when the lights was out you could sit in the same bench, if anyone was sitting in your place you just pushed them out of the way.

I don't think I will ever finish my life story, it's my way of going down memory lane. When I go back to Limerick I expected to see my Limerick as I left it as was all them years ago, but times has changed and we must move on. But not yet.

There was one girl who used to come to the fair, after all these years I just thought of her name, Peggy Manny. She made up her mind if anyone was going to get her scarf they would have to catch her first. She could run like a hare. I made up my mind I was



going to be the one to do it, After all she was only a mere girl and I couldn't let her outrun me.

One night she came to the fair and I made up my mind this was going to be the night I was going to get her scarf. It was raining earlier in the day and there was pools of water on the ground. The time came, she took off and I went after her with the rest of the boys and girls looking on. As I was about to pull her scarf she was about to jump over a pool of water. I knew if I pulled her scarf both of us would have fallen in the water. I let go and I fell in the water.

She came back and with the rest of the boys and girls she laughed her head off. I felt like a pillock, it wasn't the first time in my life I felt like a pillock and it wasn't going to be the last. Well that is what growing up is all about. I must say, I didn't get her scarf but I did make a good friend. What would we do without a past? We wouldn't have nothing to look back at, nothing to remind us of some of the happiest days of our lives.

## A FRIEND

Today God is a good friend. More then once in my life when I needed him he was there, I didn't see him I didn't have to. I felt things was about to change in my life and I felt this was the time to pull myself together. For the first time in a long time I felt I wasn't alone. There was a time in my life I didn't believe in myself, never mind God or man. I spent some time in London, where I became alcoholic. The Doctors told me if I didn't give up drinking I would be dead in 12 months.

It was about that time I got a letter from my mother in Limerick telling me to go and see my sister, Mary in Halifax. In them days when your parents told you to do something you did it. Even if they were at the other side of the world. So I came to Halifax, only for a week, that would be about 1957. For the second time in my life fate was to play a part in my plans. There were a lot of Irish people in Halifax at the time, some from Limerick. Every pub you went into there

was someone you knew . Every weekend was like one big party. We worked hard and we played hard. That didn't help me at the time. The Irish had a bad name in them days, just a few of your Countrymen gave your Country a bad name. Even to-day it's just a few people give their Country a bad name, but we have to live with it.

Anyway I registered with a doctor, he was a Limerick man. He told me the same thing the doctors in London told me, but I didn't hear him. I didn't want to know. I didn't know what day it was and I didn't care. But one way or another, I knew I had to do something about it, but what, I didn't know.

When I came to Halifax the first place I lived was 6 Norfolk Place King Cross. It was a boarding house. There were 10 lodgers, most of them was Irish men. There was only one toilet and a bath room. Getting a bath was almost impossible. So every Saturday I used to go to the public baths in Boothtown. They were the days. Then my two brothers came to town.

Then we rented a house, 44 Crossley Terrace. It was a back to back house, the toilet was halfway down the street. They were called out-door toilets, that was no good to you after a hard night on the beer. That is where the bucket under the bed came in handy. The things you think of when you start writing your life story.

One day, or night, I don't remember, I met a girl who was to become my wife. Every time I looked round she was there, every day after work and weekends she was there. At the time that is what I needed, someone there not saying anything. If she did I wouldn't have heard her. I was very mixed up in them days.

It would be fair to say my wife was in love with me before I was in love with her. So I decided if I could give up drink I would ask her to marry me. No way was I going to ask her to marry me as I was at the time.

## GETTING MARRIED

We got married on Easter Monday 1959. Our first house was 26 Marten Street, Boothtown. They were called one up and one down houses with out-door toilets. Then we moved to a place called Illingworth. We have 4 children and we also have 6 grandchildren and I wouldn't change a thing. Anyway the wife wouldn't let me.

I believe, once alcoholic always alcoholic. I also believe you can do something about it if you put your mind to it. Look on it as a challenge between you and whatever your problem is.

I used to drink every night at the time I was living on my own. that was the days of the bucket under the bed. When I wanted to make pee I would get out of bed, stand at side of the bed and use my leg to pull the bucket out. Because I had a very small bladder, I couldn't bend over because it was so full, I would stand at the side of the bed having a pee screaming my head off in pain, and I did this every night.

I must have done it for 2 years, maybe more. So you see, I do know something about drinking.

There are a lot of people that can help you, but you must want that help and you must play your part. At the end of the day it's up to you. But drink is not the answer to any problem. Sooner or later an alcoholic will wind up alone. That is why I had to win. I was afraid to be left alone. My wife hasn't read this yet. She didn't know any thing about it, not even today and we are married 38 years now.

#### BACK TO LIMERICK

There was six cinemas in Limerick. They used to change the film every second day. We went to the two nearest ones. For 6 nights a week, from half-past six to half-past 8, our parents knew where we where. It was a penny to go to the Gods. The doorman's name was Max. Whichever picture house you went to, the doorman was always called Max. One of his jobs was keep us in order and stop us from falling

into the stalls, to us kids it looked like 50-60 feet down below.

When you looked down into the stalls all you could see looking up at you was a lot of heads. Another one of Max's jobs was to see that we didn't get up to any devilment, that is what we used to call trouble in them days, he did this by shining his torch every now and then. We always thought he was crying because was he was always sitting in the corner sniffing.

We couldn't see his face because the lights was out. When the film was over he would run us out so he could get ready for the next performance.

#### OUR NEW HOUSE

There was big houses not far from our house, where well off people used to live. Anyone that had three meals a day was well off in them days. Most families saw more dinner hours than dinner in them days. We moved to a new housing estate. By this time there was 12 of us living in a 3 bedroom house.

The new housing estate was at the other side of the city, but to me it might as well have been on the other side of the moon. It was the first housing estate in Limerick. We had two bedrooms upstairs, no carpet or lino on the floor, we slept four in a bed and had no sheets. We might have a blanket or a overcoat to keep ourselves warm.

We had a straw mattress with a slit down the middle to put the straw in. You had to change straw at least once a fortnight. When we wanted straw we had to go to town to get it. Well I had to, and carry it home on my back. But if I had a pram or boxcar it would have been much better, and I could have made a couple of coppers doing jobs for other people. Every penny was needed to put food on the table in them days. This is 1997 and there are millions of people in the world today don't even have as much as I had. So some things never change do they?

In our new house we had what used to be called a parlour, that was my Father and Mothers bedroom.



Before I got married I took my wife-to-be home, it was in the summer. By this time there were only a few of us left at home, and the parlour was free so she slept in there. She left the window open, someone left the gate open, and a horse got into the garden and put his head in the window. His heavy breathing woke her up and she woke every one in the house up screaming like hell. The kitchen was the kitchen, the sitting room and the dining room, with a sink in the corner with one cold water tap.

When we were still kids, at this particular time, there would be 5 of us going to school. My mother got up first to get our breakfast ready. Can you imagine what it was like getting 5 kids ready to go to school!

My father would keep out of the way until we went to school. My mother used wash the clothes by hand and ring them out by hand and hang them out to dry in the summer. In the winter she would put them in front of the fire to dry. There was no washing machines in them days.

We had a tin bath, we put it in between the kitchen and the toilet, we filled it up with cold water. All of us had to use the same water because it took so long to fill it up. In the winter we would just jump in and out. In the summer we didn't want to get out. When we were finished we would open the back door and tip the water into back garden. Some of the water came back into the hall. We would have to get a brush and wash the hall and the toilet out. The coal house was under the stairs, the door was in the kitchen. Every time we tipped in a bag of coal or a bag peat the dust would come back on you. You wouldn't have time to get out of the way and the kitchen would get covered with dust as well.

Now when I go back to Limerick, I go down to see the house. I would like to ask the people living there if I could have a look around the house but the words won't come out. The corner of my house was facing the River Shannon, there is about 200 houses facing the river. The spray from the river would come up

over the bank, across the field onto the houses, they were always damp. The houses was about 400 yards away from the river. I lived at the bottom of the hill. Even when it wasn't raining the wind would be blow the spray of water across onto the houses, up the street and by time I got to my home I would be soaked through. The houses was always damp in winter, it would take all the summer to dry them houses out and by winter it was back again.

### MARSHLAND

The houses was built on Marshland to start with. All the people in the new estate came from different parts of the city with the same family atmosphere as we had. It was a way of life. It was something you were born into but no one knew how to build up that way of life. It was where everyone looked after each other, where children could play and you knew they were safe. Someone decided to move families out and put them down in the middle of nowhere and then forget them. All strangers to each other.

They didn't know how to build up the same atmosphere they were used to, it was way of life it was something you were born into. Some people found it very hard to make changes. Like I said, the housing estate was at the other side of the city, but to me it might as well have being on the other side of the moon . Maybe everyone felt the same way and they just gave up.

### HOUSING ESTATE

The housing estate was built in the middle of a fishing Community. The fisherman went out in massive rowing boats fishing for salmon. They would throw their nets out and leave them until they got full of salmon. Four men standing in a boat, pulling big nets in full of salmon into the boats, would be going up and down in the water. It was a sight you would never forget.

There was a wall about 2 miles long, the nets was hanging on the wall to dry and the men would repair

them in between tides. I would sit there for hours watching them repairing nets, cleaning and painting the boats with a pipe in the side of their mouth and their hands going 'ninety nine to the dozen' mending the nets, and my eyes going 'ninety nine to the dozen' trying to see what they were doing. I had to give it up as a bad job. If you were interested in what they were doing they would take time out to explain it to you.

Life was so slow in them days people just wanted to live from day to day. Sometimes you think that life was just standing still. Then one day there was no nets, no fisherman to tell a young lad what it was like for four men standing in a rowing boat day in and day out, in all kinds of weather fighting just to make a living and stay alive. It must have been in their blood. The boats was left in the middle of the river tied to the buoys to rot. If you were to ask them why was this happening they would say, times are changing and we must change with it. Today we call it progress. To have a future, you must have a past. But when

somebody come along and takes away your past and leaves you no hope for the future, what have you left?

## ENTERTAINMENT

We had to make our own entertainment in them days. In the summer we would go for a walk or borrow someone's horse, without the owner's permission, and go for a ride up and down the fields.

The girls was as bad as the boys, it was all harmless fun. They still ride horses bare-back in Ireland.

There was no pictures on a Sunday night so we would go down the country, three on a bike. One was riding, one on the cross-bar and one sitting on the handle-bars. We had sore arses coming and going, it was like riding a horse for the first time. By the time we got there we had all had a go riding the bike. You might say were we crazy, but that's what young people do, crazy things. I was about 18 then.

There used to be boards on the side of the road for dancing, I think they were called platforms, where

country people would meet to have a 'hooley'.

We were called the townies, happy days. There would be someone with a penny whistle, a violin and a melodeon, it would cost sixpence to dance all night. The country women were big women if you tried to get off with one of them you would be in trouble. If you were lucky enough to get off with one of them you would have your hands full. It would be two or three clock in the morning before we left for home. We done this every Sunday night in the summer, 25 miles each way. We would have to get up for work in the next morning. Yes, enjoying yourself had a price in them days, as well no work, no money and no fun. Yes we done some crazy things in our days as well. If I could have a second chance I wouldn't change a thing.

We never had snow in Limerick, we had a lot of frost. We would throw buckets of water down the middle of the road, the water would freeze and we would make a slide. There would be about 12 of us boys and girls.

We would play follow the leader. There was always a show-off, especially in front of the girls. Anyway he would take off, we would follow him. If he fell at the bottom of the hill we would all pile on top of him. He never learned, but that's life.

#### TIED DOWN TO THE HOUSE

All women was tied down to the house. If they wanted to go to see their relatives they would have to take 4 or 5 kids with them. They would have to walk it. There was no buses, so it was better to stay at home. It was a man's world in them days alright. They didn't have much but they could get out of the house for the day. Mothers would stay at home to look after the children. My mother used to read the Oracle, it was a women's magazine the size of a comic. It cost tuppence.

Two trips to the pictures a week cost a penny a time, if she was lucky. Like all Irish people at the time my mother was very superstitious. Before going to bed at night she would sweep in front of the fire, no one could sit at the fire after 12 o' clock at night because



it was for the spirits. She wouldn't iron a shirt on a Sunday at no price, When I came home after 12 o'clock at night I would walk on the road because the path was for the spirit. I worked in a restaurant, I used to walk home with two girls after 12 o' clock. There was a graveyard just before we got to the housing estate. When we got to the graveyard we would bless ourselves and take off like a bats out of hell until we passed the graveyard.

New year's Eve night was the saddest night in the year for my parents and their generation. My father and mother used go to bed early every New Year's Eve night because they didn't want to stay up to listen to the bells ringing the new year because the bells reminded them of their families that was dead. I have to look at New Year's Eve as if it was just any other night of the year. I do go out on New Year's Eve these days, my wife and myself go out with some of the family and some friends and when mid-night comes I get a lump in my throat when I think of my

family that's dead, and I feel very sad, but men don't cry! Over the years I learned to cry in silence. Now in 1997 my relations in Limerick, the third generation, is doing the same thing. It's good to see that some things never change. I think everyone is superstitious even today. I could tell you a lot of things about my generation, but you wouldn't believe it. Another time maybe.

### MY SCHOOL DAYS

What I remember most about my school days and why I didn't learn. My first school was a convent, it was run by nuns. They used to look down at me from behind their black veil, they used to scare the pants off of me. I was only five or six at time. The school had big iron gates. They used to close at the same time every morning. You could hear them close throughout the school. They would stay closed until going home time. Anyone that was late couldn't get in. Anyone inside couldn't get out until going home time. Most of the time you felt you were never going to see your family again.

Most mornings I wouldn't have a breakfast before I went to school and probably no dinner to go home to. Life was hard in them days. Oh yes, I must not forget get the gill of milk and the bun I got at school. If there was any left over I might get another one before I went home. But as bad as it was, it would probably be the only meal I would have for two or three days a week, and I wasn't alone, there was hundreds like me.

It's no wonder boys and girls of my generation grew up with little or no education. The eldest of the family had to go out to work as soon as he or she could to help to keep the family. That would be when you were about 12 years of age. It must have been hard on our parents to let us go out to work before we had time to grow up. My father got five shillings a week on dole two shillings and sixpence a week from Saint Vincent de Paul, a church charity, for thirteen of us and they gave me and my brother our clothes for our first Communion and my Confirmation.

Two days after making my Confirmation I had go out to work. I was just twelve years of age.

My first job was in a bake-house. I worked twelve hours a day six days a week, I was getting two shillings and sixpence a week. No spending money out of that. By the time I was 16 I had three other jobs. As a messenger boy now, I was earning five shillings a week. My mother gave me sixpence spending money but my father didn't know about it.

But things was about to get a little better for me and you might say for my family as well. I got a job in the Savoy; it was restaurant. I got a job as a kitchen boy, now I was earning seven shillings and sixpence a week and getting three meals a day. I had to work all kinds of hours for that but I didn't mind because I wasn't eating at home my mother gave me two shillings and sixpence spending money. You could do a lot with two shillings and sixpence in them days.

I worked myself up from kitchen boy to head porter in two and half years. That wasn't easy with the little education I had. Now I was earning £2 :10 shillings a week . I was getting 10 shillings spending money. Now I was bringing more money into the house than my father. That didn't go down very well with my father, well that's life.

### A WOMAN GAFFER

In the Savoy, my gaffer was a woman, we had to call her Madam. She was a real Sergeant Major, she was hard but fair. If you wanted to be a waitress and if you could stay the pace you would come out number one. You could get a job in any place in the world.

I saw madam lift up a girl's dress to see if her slip was clean. I've seen girls cry. Some of them didn't make it, but she never let anyone go. I think she knew the money was needed at home. Her heart was in the right place but she didn't want anyone to know about it. Even the chef had to keep two steps ahead of her all the time.

I remember we put in for a 5 shillings rise. The shop steward was afraid of her. I think we were all afraid of her but some more than others. She was to meet him with the union representative to talk about the rise, but he didn't go. The head porter and myself decided to meet her, after all she was just mere woman! We kept telling ourselves, we couldn't back down. We told everyone we were going to meet her, we were shitting ourselves. She gave us a hard time but she'd done all this before, we hadn't. It was good experience for us. After what seemed to be a life time we got a half-a-crown, that was the easy part. We still had to face her the next day at work. I was awake all night wondering about what was going happen the next day. I expected to get the sack.

Anyway the time came, everyone was on edge what was she going to do? Every one was shitting themselves. No one wanted to know about the half-a-crown we got, we were waiting for madam to come in to get it over with. As soon as she got to the

office, before she took her coat off, it was around the building, she was in. She never changed her routine, I think she enjoyed keeping us waiting. When she got to the kitchen every one was afraid to look her way in case she bit their head off. The chef said 'Good morning madam'. She answered him, she reminded every one who got them their raise. Then she called the shop steward out of his cubby-hole. She got stuck into him and gave him 'hell over right everyone', and he never answered her.

Micky, the head porter at the time had always to wanted to be a chef, so she gave him a job. She then offered me the head porter's job.

I reminded her there was another lad before me and I thought he should get the job. She said she wanted someone that can see what is to be done and get it done. I had 4 other lads working with me.

## RESPONSIBLE

I could no longer pretend to be doing something when she was around. Now I had responsibility. I was responsible for the running of the kitchen 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I was getting a man's wage and I had to do a man's job. I was only 16 at the time. Like I said my generation didn't have much time to be young. Madam, was about 50 when she decided to get married, by now we were getting used to her. This came as a bit of a shock to us, she was the same madam, but different if you like, that is the only way I can explain it. The people that knew her was going to miss her. We also knew the person that was going to take her place, she came up in the ranks and she was a basket and we would have found it very hard to work with her.

On the day madam left to get married, 16 of us walked out. That would give you some idea of how much we got to know her and how much respect we had for her, and how much contempt we had for the



person that was going to take her place. I've worked with a few woman gaffers since then but no one could take her place.

#### WHAT I LEARNED AT SCHOOL

One of the things I learned at school was what the English had done to the Irish in 1916. That made me very angry. But now I had to leave school to go to work so I had to put all that behind me for another day. I tried to talk to my father about 1916, but he wouldn't talk about it.

But my mother told me about her young days. She told me that all my cousins was in the IRA. I believe and still believe that the IRA in 1916 was fighting for my Country, but today, things have changed, I don't believe that any more. A few names I can remember are the Pearse brothers Michael Collins, and Eamon de Valera, whom I had the pleasure of meeting when I was fifteen. He was the first President of Ireland.

Getting back to what my mother told me, about her brother who died in France in the first World War. They gave my mother's family a big copper plaque. I always wanted it but I never got it, if I'd have been older at the time, I would have stolen it.

My grandfather hung the plaque on the wall. He must have been very proud of him and why not, he was his son.

In them days when the soldiers or the Black and Tans came to the house looking for members of the IRA, they didn't knock on the door they just kicked it in. But when they came to my mother's house and saw the plaque hanging on the wall they just stopped dead in their tracks, apologised and left.

As time went on they stopped coming the house. That left me with a lot of questions to be answered. Why did my uncle die in France? Why was he fighting for England and not for Ireland like the rest of the Family? It took me years to satisfy myself that although he wore another uniform, he wasn't a traitor

to his country. Like thousands of Irishmen he'd done what he believed in and paid the price, what more can any man do? That is all in the past and what have we learned from it?

#### WHEN I LEFT IRELAND

When I left Ireland, I left a part of myself there. If home is where your heart is then I have never left Ireland, not even after 40 years or more. I was 25 years of age when I went to London. I came over to one of the ten fathers and mothers I was telling you about earlier.

When I got there I had a job waiting for me and some money to tide me over and a place of my own.

I couldn't stay with my friend's family, their place was too small. For the first time in my life I had a bed to myself, I could turn over anyway I liked without getting my brother's foot in my mouth. Yes, I was very lucky. There was a song in them days, it said there was gangs of people digging for gold on the streets of

London, and a lot of people believed it. You had to work hard for money but you could make good money. I used to go home two or three times a year with more money than I ever see in my life. I had that much I didn't think I could ever spend it all. I enjoyed myself I can tell you.

Until one day I found myself out on the road, I didn't know what to do I couldn't go to my friends, they gave me a good start when I came to London. There I was, a stranger, in a strange country all alone. I didn't know what to do or where to go. But I knew this was my problem and I had to work in out for myself.

I don't remember what was I doing on my first day on the road, I don't even remember if I had something to eat or not. I suppose I was just walking around doing nothing and going nowhere in particular. But when it started to get dark I knew I had to find a place to get my head down for the night. The only place I could think of was Paddington railway station, I used to live around there at the time. It was a big place, you could

get lost there in the daytime, but at night that was a different matter. After 11 at clock at night it was very quiet and empty.

So the only place I could find warm and dry was the toilets. So my first night asleep on the road cost me a penny, but when I woke up in the morning, the imprint of the toilet seat was on my arse and every bone in my body was aching. I would have given anything to have woke up with my brother's foot in my mouth. I must have thought the whole world was against me. But it was of my making and I had to work it out for myself. There was an old Irish saying, 'when one door closes, another one opens', but you never know what is behind it, and it's a good thing too.

Some time the next day or the day after, I don't remember, I met a girl. Being on the road was a way of life for her, what she didn't know about being the road wasn't worth knowing. She took me under her wing and looked after me like a mother hen. Through her I met some wonderful people. They were like a

big family, they would share almost everything with you. It wasn't much, but just enough to keep you going. But first, you had to be accepted into their little group. They wouldn't share their drink with you unless you had a bottle, they used to drink methylated spirits, it was very cheap but it was dynamite. I saw young girls looking like old women and young boys looking like old men.

The road to Hell is very easy, but the road back is very hard. I know I was knocking on its doors for six months. There was a saying in them days 'you made your bed, you lie on it'. There was no help in them days and very little sympathy for you. Today people on the road are called homeless people, in my days we were called 'deadlegs', 'layabouts', 'good for nothings', everything bar people. In many ways the road back was Hell.

## ANOTHER DAY IN MY LIFE

Another day in my life, I was walking around London doing nothing and going nowhere in particular. I met a guy I used to work with back in Limerick, I knew him straight away. I was hoping he wouldn't recognise me but he did.

To cut a long story short I went back to his place and for the first time in 6 months I had a bath, a good meal and a good night's sleep. The next morning I had a good breakfast, a change of clothes and some money to tide me over. So I decided I was not going back on the road. But I still didn't know what to do about it.

So I went to the Labour Exchange and told them my story. They send me to a hostel, I told them my story. They said I could stay for a few weeks while I was looking for a job. But first I had to take my clothes off so they could check them for fleas and bugs. I told them I just got them a few hours before, but that didn't matter. I had to have a shower, the water was

freezing and food was unbearable. I had better food on the road.

The hostel people didn't encourage you to hang around too long. I got myself a job and a place to stay, I went to see my friends. I told them what I was doing for the last six months, they gave me a hard time for not going to them when I needed help. Saying that, I think they were very proud of me. I'd just got back on my feet when I got that letter from my mother to go to Halifax.

#### THE ROAD TO PECKET

When I got made redundant in September 1982 after working 40 years of my life, I decided to do something about my education. I could always read but my writing wasn't very good. It was April 1983 before I done anything about it. People kept telling me it was my right to be educated, but no one told me about the price I had to pay. To start with it took all the strength I had just to get to the door of the



building. Before I went in I looked up and down the street to be sure there was no one around that might see me go in. Anyway I got to the office the first person I met was a young girl, she was young enough to be my daughter, that didn't go down very well with me. After telling her what I was doing there, she told me I needed to go to some literacy courses. I felt as if I just wasted 40 years of my life. The next day I started my literacy classes just to find out that the tutor was a young girl as well. But I carried on hoping things might get better, but things went on the same old way like it has been for years.

It was late in 1983, a group of us got together with the help of two tutors that believed that people should have a say in their own education. It was slow to start with, but it was a start. Did you ever try to change the System? If you did then you know what I mean. There was thousands of stories in the education centre I was at, sent in by people with reading and writing difficulties. Some of the stories was written by

the people themselves and some was written with the help of tutors in other centres. We got all the stories together, we had nothing else to do. We wasn't enjoying what we were doing anyway, I know I wasn't. Maybe this was the change we were waiting for. 'We' were group of able-bodied and disabled people, most of us was long term unemployed.

We started up a magazine to give people like ourselves a voice, but what can you do with two hours a week. So, we decided to take six stories home so we could read them or get one the family to read them for us and pick out the one or two we would like to read the next week .

There was six of us and we each had six stories. We read every story very carefully before deciding if it could go in the magazine or not. Sometimes we felt if we could change a story, this way, or that way, it might tell the story better. Sometimes we felt a drawing or a photograph might help. Then we would write to the person that sent the story in asking for a

drawing or a photograph, and for permission to change the story. We never done anything without permission. Sometimes we would have to go to the library or get old newspapers or books for some drawings and photographs. We done this by working together as a group and the magazine took off.

The first magazine The *'50 Years of Memories'*, another magazine, was paid for by the Yorkshire Art Association. It was published by a life history group and paid for by a loan from Adult Education. But to raise money to do some more magazines we had to start up a committee. It was by students and for students from Adult Education, we didn't like the title, students, we preferred to call them people.

It was the first such committee in the country. The system gave us a room for our meetings. I think they were hoping we might fall on our faces, but we didn't. The committee, like the magazine took off. It's fair to say the magazine group and the committee was the same group of people.

The committee had a problem where to start. After thinking about it for some time we decided to start with a coffee morning, again in the education centre. It was hard to start with, we had to buy the sugar, tea, coffee, milk and biscuits out of our own pockets. We made £5 for each coffee morning, not much you may think but it was a start. We never got our money back but it was a good experience.

Another one of our jobs was to organise the launching, the selling of the magazine and to find a place big enough to have a good night out, and to invite as many people as possible. Remember this was another first for us, none of us had done anything like that before and we didn't have much to start with. Besides looking for a place to have the launch, we had to get someone to give something to raffle and someone to do the disco free, and a buffet for as little as possible. It was hard work but we done it, we found people in general very generous. Don't forget we started out with a new idea,

something different. People put a lot of trust in us and we didn't let them down.

Because of the magazine, we became members of the National Students Association for Basic Education Students, and Gatehouse Books, Hulme Adult Education Centre in Manchester and other Associations that was around at the time were also members. Together we were on the move and the word 'literacy' was on its way out, and not before time. We must never forget and never let other people forget that we are people first and foremost, not labels.

In the summer of 1984 we attended Nottingham University, with 'Write First Time', an Adult Education organisation, on a week's writing course. It was like somebody opening the door of freedom. Before this, I used to sit in a room being a slave to the 'I can't read, I can't write' idea, afraid to tell people about the pain of feeling that this was my first and only chance. What helped was there was someone there to write

my words down. And what helped me was meeting other people with obvious scars of lack of education who had the common bond of writing life stories.

Nottingham University was my cradle of birth and it was the birth place of Pecket Well College. It has always been a dream of people of all nationalities to have a say in their own education, in what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it.

In 1982 the system told you what you were going learn and how you were going learn it. To-day in 1997 things have not changed much within the system.

But today we do have Pecket Well College, not a very big place but all great things start off in a small way.

The same group of people that started the magazine group and the first students' committee was the same group of people that opened Pecket Well College.

## DETERMINATION

With hard work and determination we turned a shell of an old Co-Op shop and warehouse, from a dream into a reality. Not just our dream, but the dreams of hundreds of people from all nationalities we met up and down the country. The idea of Pecket Well College was always there. It just happened that we were the group that had the opportunity to do something about it. That was in 1986.

The next 8 years opened up a bright brand new world for us. So as well as raising money to get the college opened, we were also raising money to run courses in other education centres. We did some courses in Hazelwood Castle, near Tadcaster in Yorkshire, we did weekend courses at Northern College in Barnsley, we even went back to Nottingham University to put on a weekend course. So by the time we opened the College on the 11th March 1992, we had a lot of experience and we had good ideas of what people wanted.

Pecket Well College was the first one in the country where people have a say in their own education, plan and sometimes people run their own courses.

In Pecket Well College we encourage each other to be proud of ourselves especially when we are up against those who would like to tell us who we ought to be, rather than be proud of who we really are.

And as far as we know we are still the only college where people have full control over their own education.



The author is donating all the profits from this book to  
**Pecket Well College's 'Stone Appeal'**

This appeal is to raise **£150,000** which will enable us to buy the College building in Hebden Bridge, which we currently lease, before that lease runs out.


The author thanks the many, many friends who helped him along the way during the writing and publishing of this book.

*(If all the names were listed there'd be no room for the story!)* **Thank you one and all**

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# FLANAGAN



## Joe Flanagan

is very proud of his life story. He was born in a time when the eldest child in the family had to leave school early and go out to work. Joe went to work at twelve years of age.

The next 40 years were work, work and work. He was later to find out, like the rest of us, that life is the hardest school of all.

## Looking Back

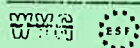
Joe writes as he remembers things, one memory reminds him of another and so on. His story unfolds like a diary of events. This book took Joe a long, long time to write. One of the reasons being he had no photographs of his early life, and Joe wanted to 'paint' a picture of his memories in words.

He has succeeded, the words inside this book are enough for the reader to see the pictures he 'paints' in our minds.

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