

GAA Oral History Project

Interview Report Form

Name of Interviewer	Arlene Crampsie
Date of Interview	14 th April 2011
Location	Interviewee's home, Valentia Island, Co. Kerry
Name of Interviewee (Maiden name / Nickname)	Mick O'Connell
<u>Biographical Summary of Interviewee</u>	
Gender	Male
Born	Year Born: 1937 Home County: Kerry
Education	Primary: Knightstown NS, Valentia Island, Co. Kerry Secondary: CBS Cahirciveen, Co. Kerry Third Level: UCC
Family	Siblings: 3 brothers & 5 sisters Current Family if Different: Married to Rosaleen O'Reilly with 2 sons and 1 daughter
Club(s)	Valentia Young Islanders; Waterville
Occupation	Western Union Cable Company; Construction Worker in America; Sugar Beet in England; Fishing and Farming
Parents' Occupation	Fisherman, Ships Pilot [Father]; Home Maker [Mother]
Religion	Roman Catholic
Political Affiliation / Membership	Independent
Other Club/Society Membership(s)	Parents and Friends of the Mentally Handicapped; Kerry Local Heritage Group

REFERENCE NO. KY/1/24

Date of Report	18 th August 2012
Period Covered	1930s – 2011
Counties/Countries Covered	Kerry, Dublin, Americas, USA
Key Themes Covered	Travel, Supporting, Grounds, Facilities, Playing, Training, Coaching, Officials, Administration, Celebrations, Material Culture, Education, Religion, Media, Emigration, Involvement in GAA Abroad, Role of Clergy, Role of Teachers, Role of Women, Role of the Club in the Community, Volunteers, GAA Abroad, Irish Language, All-Ireland, Club History, County History, Earliest Memories, Family Involvement, Childhood, Impact on Life, Career, Politics, Ban on Foreign Games and Dances, Opening of Croke Park, Relationship with the Association, Professionalism, Retirement, Relationships, Economy / Economics
Interview Summary	Mick O’Connell from Valentia Island in Kerry is one of Gaelic football’s finest ever players. This wide-ranging interview opens with O’Connell discussing his family background and upbringing on Valentia Island, including his introduction to Gaelic football. The emphasis on fun and informality is highlighted. The informal games played on the island included those played among themselves and soccer matches with Spanish sailors. O’Connell’s first match came when he was 17 and he charts his progression as a player for club and county. He remarks on the lack of fanfare in the family when he made the county team and the backdrop of emigration in the 1950s. O’Connell himself remained on the island, taking up a job with the cable company organising his work around football, avoiding shift-work for fear it would impact on his sport. He talks about his approach to developing his skills, his belief in the importance of sportsmanship, relationships with other players, transport to training and games, his attitude towards post-match celebrations. Big games and major venues (and their facilities) are recalled, including such venues as Gaelic Park and Wembley Stadium. As well as shedding light on the character of Gaelic games in the middle decades, the life of an inter-county player and the geography of Kerry football, O’Connell discusses his move to England for work. He also talks about his personal life, meeting his wife and life after football. He reflects on writing his book, A Kerry Footballer, as well as his involvement in local politics. To conclude the interview, he talks about the Kerry football tradition and the impact that the GAA – and his profile in it – has had on his life, with reference to, amongst other things,

	<p>the opportunities it has afforded him to see the world.</p> <p>00:00 Introduction</p> <p>00:25 Discusses his earliest memories of the GAA and his upbringing on Valentia Island. His father settled on Valentia Island in 1933 and he was born there in 1937. His initiation into the game was playing in school and seeing the local football team, the Young Islanders, play. They were a good team and they played their matches locally and in Cahersiveen. He mentions games in school, seeing the local football team from the island, which played on the island and in Cahersiveen.</p> <p>00:58 On summer evenings, 'old and young would just gather for a kick', for recreational purposes.</p> <p>01:20 First memory of a game outside the island was in 1945 when his father took him and friends to Cahirciveen to watch a south Kerry final between Valentia and Waterville. Played on a field that is no longer in use. Valentia won.</p> <p>01:48 Discusses how, as youngsters, they just played amongst themselves in school and in the evenings.</p> <p>02:16 Mentions that his mother was from the mainland and was 'never at a match in her life'. She did the work around the home, helping with the cows, while his father was at sea fishing and piloting. Refers to a bachelor uncle who was born in the 1870s and who lived with them for a number of years – 'I don't think he ever saw a game'.</p> <p>02:36 The interest in the game from his father. Coming from Beginish Island there was no possibility that he would have been a player, but being an active man, he was sure he would have played football had he had the opportunity.</p> <p>02:50 There was 'no in-built' tradition of Gaelic football in the house, but his father would have bought them a ball to play with.</p> <p>03:23 Mentions that there was no such thing as organised training. Family and friends would just play during their spare time. Mentions that he would have been around 15 or 16 years old before he ever played a match off Valentia Island. Up until then, they played amongst themselves.</p> <p>04:06 Mentions that football was just a pastime and that there was a rough and ready field on the island. Crowds would gather on it on summer evenings just to kick football.</p>
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	<p>05:00 Discusses the informality of the games played on the island. On the field, they might occasionally pick teams amongst themselves. Spanish trawlers would sometimes come in and they would play with the fishermen, who didn't have the money to go to bars. They would play with them, playing soccer.</p> <p>05:59 Mentions that while some people might think they were deprived, there was nothing he liked better than 'playing in the bare feet in the summer grass...there was a great feeling of the ball on the foot.' Mentions that he was 12 years- old before he ever got a pair of boots.</p> <p>06:21 It was about 1954, when Mick was 17, that he played his first match. The following year, he was still underage for minor and he played for a team based around the Iveragh peninsula, South Kerry. It was a very good team which won the Kerry championship and it was this which brought him to public notice.</p> <p>07:00 Discusses the absence of any great excitement in the family or on the island when he became a county player. There was not as much publicity then and life was very different, with people struggling to 'make ends meat.' Emigration was a big issue. He speculates that half the people who went to school with emigrated.</p> <p>07:20 Mick got a job with the cable company on the island where he worked from 1956 to 1966. This was very convenient for playing football. There was a 'bit of celebration' on the island in 1959 when Mick captained Kerry and the Sam Maguire was brought to the island.</p> <p>07:45 Discusses the differences between playing for club and county and how more was expected of you with the club because you were a county-selected player.</p> <p>09:05 Discusses preparations for games. Training for the county team at that stage was 'minimal'. Maybe a 'couple of weeks a year'. In 1959, it was the month of August before the team trained together. Mentions that it was up to players to 'get themselves fit' and that they trained away at home. Mentions that very few people had cars to travel and that he – O'Connell - was lucky to have the job he had. He worked 9 to 5 and half-day Saturday, but says that he wouldn't take on shift-work because it would have affected his football. 'Some people were surprised at that, but if one likes a sport you will do certain things to assist you play it to the best of your ability and that was the case with me.'</p>
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	<p>10:02 Discusses the challenges presented by Island life: you would have to row across to play matches which could be difficult if the weather wasn't good. Some people did it for a living, Mick did it for sport. Mentions that when he came home from matches, there was little questioning of how he played; his mother's only concern was that he didn't get injured. He was pleased that that was the way it was: it enabled him to be more 'care-free' in his approach.</p> <p>11:00 Contrasts very different attitudes to playing the game in the past and present. He dismisses as 'nonsense' the talk he hears of people making sacrifices for their sport. Gaelic football was a 'pastime' and he was thankful for that.</p> <p>11:35 Discusses how keeping fit was a matter 'trial and error'. Admits to making mistakes, but he says that he had the freedom to practice and run. Anybody could prepare to be physically fit, but he would have to improvise to practice football. He got a lot of assistance from 'local lads'.</p> <p>12:50 Discusses travelling to training. Training was limited, but when he went, he would take the boat and car. It wasn't ideal - it meant that he travelled by boat, sat into a car for an hour and half, trained and sat into a car again. Mentions that he has learned over the years that in training you need to exercise well, rest well and eat well, but 'it wasn't always possible.'</p> <p>13:38 Discusses the place of the club in the local community. The club was 'part of the island life'...young men played football, there was a good following for it, there wouldn't be a lot of long distance travelling in it, because it was usually limited to the Iveragh peninsula.</p> <p>14:12 Mentions how the history of the club had mostly being passed down orally and that nothing much had been written about it.</p> <p>14:45 Discusses the importance of sportsmanship. Mentions how fielding and good kicking were the basic skills and if a person was good at that, that was how they were rated. And yet, Mick O'Connell mentions places over-arching emphasis on the importance of sportsmanship. Indeed, he would like to be remembered less as a good or a very good footballer than a good sportsman – that you played by the rules. Certain things/values stand to you: his father being a seagoing man, everything in boat would be done with fastidious care, you did right or not at all. That stood to Mick in his attitude to sport and he believes his record stands as being true to the rules of</p>
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	<p>the game.</p> <p>15:30 Developing skill of fielding: one of the thrills of the game was the ability to go up and catch the ball. His attitude was to challenge the ball. Mentions the great personal satisfaction in catching a ball and how the skill has declined.</p> <p>16:43 Discusses travelling with the county team. The county team would travel by rail to major games, but to lesser games by car when five or six players would travel together. 'A trip to Dublin for a weekend was something wonderful for me coming from the island.' He travelled up mid-day on the Saturday and got in late that night. On Sunday he would play the match and get home late on Sunday night, sometimes Monday morning.</p> <p>18:00 1955, Kerry V Dublin in All-Ireland final: His father asked did he want to go and he said he didn't. He listened to the match on the radio and practiced in the field that evening. 'It wasn't that important for me to go.'</p> <p>18:50 Discusses the influence of radio and of Michael O'Hehir. The first game he listened to on the radio was probably in the 1940s. Michael O'Hehir was a 'wonderful broadcaster..'</p> <p>19:30 Travelling to play in his first All-Ireland final in 1959. It was a game in which he twisted his knee. Says he didn't play up to scratch, but Kerry won the game. There was collective training for a week before that final. It was to get conditioned for the game. To train properly however, you had to train on a regular basis over a longer period, 'but that was not possible in those days.'</p> <p>20:55 Discusses relationships with his team-mates. It was not possible to have 'everyday contact' with your team-mates. 'True amateur in every sense of the word.'</p> <p>21:42 Stepping onto Croke Park for the first time and pre-match preparation. Croke Park was a 'fine stadium', but he says he always resented that Kerry teams, for all their footballing tradition, would never bring a ball onto the field before a game to warm-up. That was 'the standard practice' at the time, but it was something Mick never agreed with. He would have been for players getting a feel for the ball and not 'going in cold'.</p> <p>22:30 Discusses the rituals of players on the morning of big games: All players would have gone to mass on the mornings of matches in those days. There was a lot of ceremony for big</p>
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	<p>games. Artane Boys Band.</p> <p>23:02 Mick says he preferred club games in the sense that you went out onto the field and got on with it. For big games there could be have an hour of ceremony before the game. As an amateur, Mick says he didn't see himself as a 'showman' – he was there to play football.</p> <p>23:40 Mentions that post- All-Ireland celebrations weren't his 'cup of tea'. It was the football game that was important to him and so he didn't involve himself much in the celebrations.</p> <p>24:00 Says that he regarded it as a 'bit pompous' to be going out celebrating a football match.</p> <p>24:10 Mentions that he got as much satisfaction playing for the club team as he did the county team. Any game you went out the challenge was against yourself, big games and small games, it was about doing well for your team.</p> <p>24:36 Discusses travelling home after games. Sometimes the team would remain in Dublin overnight on the Sunday of a match, but he always came home that night. Mentions that he had a job with the cable company, which was staffed by people who didn't know much about the GAA and O'Connell felt it wouldn't have been appropriate to be looking for more days off.</p> <p>25:23 Mentions that it would be 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning when he would return to the island and that everybody would be asleep. He acknowledges that by eschewing the celebrations and returning home there may have been a perception of him as an 'oddity' or strange.</p> <p>26:00 Discusses his attitude to the game and to some of the opponents he has met over the years. His attitude was to play the game as best he could and the opponent only became important if he won possession. Mentions that the focus on who is marking who meant that the man took precedence over the ball. Mentions pressure on players to hold their place and pressure from the mentors on the sideline encouraged some players to play beyond the rules.</p> <p>27:50 Discusses the 1961 National League final against Derry when he gave an 'exhibition of fielding.' He still has the newspaper cuttings from the day and he reads aloud the headline from the Cork Examiner.</p> <p>29:10 Mentions that he has fond memories of most games and that he avoided serious injury.</p>
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	<p>29:30 Discusses the role of the team trainer and how his role was limited by lack of access to players given how scattered they were. Mentions that the trainer was confined to 'conditioning' in the run-up to matches and that in the 1950s and 60s, when few motor cars were on the road, this was likely to be the way all across Ireland. Makes reference also to the lack of facilities.</p> <p>30:00 Discusses venues and pitches outside of Croke Park. Refers positively to Fitzgerald Stadium, Killarney and negatively to the Athletic Grounds in Cork. For a big city, Cork had poor facilities. Mentions that he played at the opening of Pearse Stadium in Galway in 1957.</p> <p>30:50 Discusses venues overseas where he has played, including Wembley Stadium in the early 1960s and the 'rough and ready' Gaelic Park in New York. Refers to a memorable game in Gaelic Park in 1959.</p> <p>31:30 Discusses travelling to New York in 1959.</p> <p>32:00 Mentions the importance of 'giving a good display' when playing abroad in front of emigrants. Refers to differences in attitude among those who travelled – where some regarded it as a 'semi holiday', he felt there was a responsibility to put on a display for the emigrants.</p> <p>32:50 Refers to large-scale emigration from Valentia Island in the 1940s and 50s. His family remained because his father was a fisherman and managed to provide his children with an education – Mick attended a Christian brothers school in Cahersiveen and got a job locally. Refers to his good fortune in not having to go abroad given that hundreds of people across the island would have been forced to do so.</p> <p>33:20 Mentions working in England for a year in 1966 after the Cable station on Valentia closed and later in America. Mentions his lack of involvement in the GAA in England due to the shift-work he was engaged in.</p> <p>33:50 Discusses his captaincy of Kerry in 1959. The role came to him after his club, South Kerry, won the county championship. Mentions that he should have been better suited to the role later in his career when he could have exerted more influence and raises questions about the suitability of the system which Kerry used to appoint captains. Expands on the qualities required of a captain on a team.</p> <p>36:00 Discusses the treatment of players with injuries, refers to his use of a masseur and advocates the importance of</p>
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	<p>taking preventative steps to avoid injury.</p> <p>37:00 Mentions that absence of a culture of complaint among players when he was playing and remarks that the GAA did as much they could for them at the time.</p> <p>37.55 Mentions the unsuitability of the terrain on the island for hurling and suggests it as a reason why Gaelic football took hold easier.</p> <p>38:20 Discusses the relationship between south Kerry and the Kerry county team and the geographic spread of Gaelic football within the county.</p> <p>39:40 Discusses the administrators in the Kerry GAA and his relationship with them. 'They were of a generation before me...and a great link with the past.' Refers to John Joe Sheehy, Tadhg Crowley, Paddy Bawn Brosnan, Murt Kelly and Jackie Lynn.</p> <p>41:11 Mentions the bagman and the fact that jerseys were always re-used. Tells a short story about one bagman, Gaffney Duggan.</p> <p>42:11 Refers to the heavy, woollen jerseys worn by players.</p> <p>42:30 Mentions that the adherence to tradition did not always serve Kerry well. Referring to the 1960 All-Ireland final against Down, he returns to the fact that Kerry players warmed-up without a ball.</p> <p>43:00 Discusses the relationship between drink and the GAA and voices criticism of alcohol sponsorship of competitions. Expresses the view that sport should retain its purity and mentions that involvement in the GAA and sport had kept him from drink when he was growing up.</p> <p>45:30 Discusses the ending of his inter-county career. Mentions that his playing career from 1956 to 1966 was his prime. He also played from 1968 to 1972 when he returned from England. Mentions that he never retired but 'eased out of it'. Mentions that when he married in 1972 and that he had other priorities then. Also mentions that younger players were coming into the county set-up and that he continued to play with the club until 1979.</p> <p>47:00 Discusses playing with Waterville after returning from England in the late 1960s. Mentions that the island team had been affected by emigration and the closure of the Cable station and he needed games if he was going to play with the</p>
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	<p>county.</p> <p>47:50 Discusses meeting his wife and how the relationship grew. Football played no part in bringing them together. Makes general observations on the relationship between women and the GAA.</p> <p>49:45 Discusses his reasons for not becoming involved in administration and comments critically on how the game has evolved since his playing days.</p> <p>50:30 Mention how his approach to the game might differ from the prevailing orthodoxy. Mentions that the ‘means of play would be as important as the victory.’</p> <p>51:15 Discusses his book, A Kerry Footballer, written in 1973, and expresses a regret that he didn’t wait longer to write and that he didn’t write more about his younger days growing up on Valentia Island. Mentions that football would still be an important part of the book, but the book wouldn’t be centred around it. Mentions that football was only a part of his life.</p> <p>52:20 Mentions that he didn’t miss football when he finished. His life circumstances had changed and that would have influenced the enjoyment he got from the game.</p> <p>53:15 Mentions that he would like to be remembered as a sportsman rather than a footballer. Refers to sport as a great outlet for him and expresses gratitude to the GAA for the opportunities it gave him.</p> <p>54:00 Discusses his involvement in local politics – he was a member of Kerry County Council for eight years. Acknowledging that his football profile helped get him elected, he goes on to outline his frustrations with the system as it operates in Ireland. He also acknowledges the insights it provided him into the important role that county councils play in people’s lives.</p> <p>56:20 Discusses his current interest/involvement with the GAA. Mentions that the Gaelic football has lost much of its appeal to him since due to the over-use of the hand in playing the ball in favour of the kick and the catch. Acknowledging that he wouldn’t follow it as intensely as many ex-players, but mentions that he now attends All-Ireland finals and some local games if they are on Sunday afternoons.</p> <p>57:20 Opines on reasons why the style of football has changed. Mentions lack of conviction among those administering the game and claims that Kerry and Dublin were responsible for starting much of the ‘handball’. Charts</p>
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	<p>the evolution of the game over his lifetime – from pure catch and kick, through the introduction of the solo-run and the use of handball. He says that the emphasis has been on improving the game by changing it, rather than on improving on what was already there. Mentions that the large attendances at today’s games is due to tribalism and partisanship, but that many of the older players – like himself – are ‘disillusioned’ at the way the game had changed.</p> <p>59:00 Discusses the ban on foreign games and mention that he openly broke it at times. Mentions that the ban outstayed its usefulness by the 1950s and that it was selectively applied to other big ball games. He says that a variety of sports is a ‘great thing’. He also refers to the growth in professionalism, the emergence of the GPA (he describes it as ‘needless’) and the weakening of the GAA’s stance on amateurism.</p> <p>01:01:30 Discusses his support for the opening of Croke Park to other sports, but comments on the need for other sports who paid their players and ignored the development of stadia to be held to account.</p> <p>01:02:25 Talks about the importance of volunteerism as ‘the basis of the GAA’.</p> <p>01:03:00 Mentions that the GAA has been to the forefront in raising the profile of the language through broadcasting games in Irish etc. What the GAA does for the language, it does fairly well, but he stresses that the GAA on its own won’t help it spread among the general public.</p> <p>01:04:00 Discusses role of clergy and mentions that Bishop Eamon Casey once threw in the ball crooked at a game in which he played. Also mentions the role that teachers are expected to play in organising games for children. He believes that children playing amongst themselves in a carefree way affords a great opportunity to develop skills and he decries the emphasis on winning at the expense of how the game is played.</p> <p>01:06:10 Discussions his own family’s involvement in the GAA and says that he didn’t impose it upon them.</p> <p>01:07:20 Discusses the Kerry football tradition – the fact that it’s all county – and is critical that administrators didn’t take a prominent role in encouraging the improvement of the game.</p> <p>01:08:50 General reflections on his involvement in the GAA. Mentions that it gave him an opportunity of having a fulfilling life in the care-free days of his youth. He remarks on how the</p>
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	<p>GAA is thriving today with fine stadia all over the country and though he repeats his disillusionment with the manner in which the game has developed, he acknowledges that there is a 'more progressive outlook' on the training of teams – players realise you can't be good at the game unless you practice at it.</p> <p>01:10:20 Mentions the impact of his GAA profile on his life after football. Mentions that he is recognised and that it is not a disadvantage. He cites the example of fundraising for his Down Syndrome son.</p> <p>01:12:00 Mentions that football was not the 'be all and end all' of his life. Nevertheless, his involvement, coming from a remote island, showed the opportunities that the GAA provided.</p> <p>01:13:00 Discusses a trip he went on following an invitation from John Kerry O'Donnell in New York to embark on a trip alongside Ollie Walsh of Kilkenny, Christy Ring of Cork and Kerry's Niall Sheehy and an America team from New York. The trip took them to the Pacific Ocean and Hawaii , Fiji, Australia and New Zealand. It was wonderful trip where they played exhibition matches. Says it was 'wonderful to see those places.'</p> <p>01:13:50 Mentions the great outlet the GAA gave him in terms of meeting people from different backgrounds that he would never have met.</p> <p>01.14.40 His parting remarks take the form of advice to the effect that if a player gives themselves to something and applies themselves they can have no grounds for complaint. Mentions that to overcome a challenge is one of the greatest satisfactions.</p>
<p>Involvement in GAA</p>	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Supporter <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Player <input type="checkbox"/> Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Coach <input type="checkbox"/> Steward</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Chairperson <input type="checkbox"/> Committee Member <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Grounds-person</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Caterer <input type="checkbox"/> Jersey Washer <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Referee <input type="checkbox"/> None</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p>
<p>Record as a Player (Titles won; Length of time played)</p>	<p>Played from 1954 – 1979. Won 6 South Kerry Championships and 3 Kerry Championships. At county level he won 13 Munster Titles, 4 All-Ireland's, 4 National Leagues and 1 Railway Cup.</p>

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Record as an Administrator (Positions held; how long for)	N/A
Format	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Audio <input type="checkbox"/> Audio-Visual
Duration	Length of Interview: 01:15:41
Language	English

To be filled in by Interviewer:

I hereby assign the copyright of the content of the above to the GAA Oral History Project on the understanding that the content will not be used in a derogatory manner. I understand that I am giving the GAA Oral History Project the right to use and make available to the public the content of this interview.

Signed: _____Arlene Crampsie_____

Date: _____18/08/12_____