

University of Limerick Oral History Project

Interview: Mary Smith

14 January 2009

I: Mary thank you very much for talking to me, will you tell me about your involvement with the NIHE in the 1970s?.

M.S.: Yes ... during the summer months I used to work because my babysitters were available and I was anxious to keep in touch with the outside world of work.

I have vivid memories of working in Admissions in Student Services, and this big application form which students completed, pages and pages of information, and then came to White House to be interviewed by faculty from the different colleges. At the time I was concerned for students who had come from rural schools, say from the likes of West Clare, as against students who had come from fee paying schools like Rockwell, Glenstal, and the like. I remember being annoyed when application forms would come back to us in the office after interviews with outlines of female applicants complete with bust and waist measurements.

Student Services was a very busy office, a lot of pressure, a lot of deadlines to be met. Rose McMahon, who is now Dudley, I do believe, was our Head of the area, and oh, it was hell for leather all the time. But it was very rewarding in that you always got a clap on the back when things were well done or when deadlines were met. There was a great social dimension also as we had many great nights, usually in local pubs. There was no drink driving of course that time, and invariably we didn't go home after the pub, it was always back to someone's house. Irrespective of how late home we were, we still made it to work the following morning. Rose was a great motivator and if she was on a day's leave we would work twice as hard to ensure tasks were completed.

Being temporary, work would finish up in Student Services when the students would enrol and start college life. Registering students was also a huge event – queues and queues of students all in line waiting to be asked questions about their personal

circumstances, what their dad's occupation etc. and I felt the students whose dad was unemployed really were uneasy. I remember a lad, James Collins, I remember him well sitting in front of me and his two eyes filled up when I asked him his dad's occupation. His Daddy was after dying and I actually knew his Daddy, I worked with him in Shannon Development. But I found that was an awful question to have to ask.

So with the students in situ and being part time, you could be shipped anywhere. I remember working up in the White House in the big office that time, doing stuff for the World Bank, the most boring thing you every saw, just putting numbers into sheets and what have you, and I remember being in Business Studies, I remember being in Continuing Education, which was a very interesting one. We used to set up evening courses for teachers and the local community and unfortunately one weekend, I was bringing the completed brochure to the printers, which was Daltons near St Mary's Cathedral, and unfortunately got waylaid on the way in and left the said brochure on the bus which was never recovered. I spent the week end back at work putting it all together again.

There was a great social scene in NIHE that time. Everybody knew everybody, numbers were small, the dreaded Mary Maguire was always in the background. I had no dealings with her whatsoever, thankfully, but I remember thinking I had it made when I got to work in Personnel. To work in Personnel, you had to have special permission because of the confidential nature I suppose of the files, and what have you, but we had a great girl in Personnel that time as well, Deirdre Manning was her name, and everybody went to town at lunchtime for lunch. It was amazing really because we weren't earning that much and I don't know how we could afford to, not alone just have lunch, but to have liquid lunch as well. I have great memories of lunchtime sessions in the Hurlers also and there was no divide status-wise, you had admin, faculty, HODs, the lot, but we always made sure someone was back in time to answer phones and keep the place ticking over.

I: Of course the community must have been small, the staff was small?.

M.S.: It was smaller, it was much smaller yes. I had a very interesting time in the Co-Op office and it was a great eye opener to me. I suppose it was my first direct dealing with students and I soon realised the hangups and the problems students had. I remember one wee lad and he was the only one of his family to go to third level; which of course wasn't unusual at that time, but all his brothers were in construction, they were builders and labourers and they were putting him through college. I remember he was due to go on Co-Op, the poor lad was very distressed at the time, and at half five, I still couldn't get away from him until half six. I arranged to meet him inside in Cruises Hotel at half seven that same evening, and I can't remember the name of the counsellor, was it Keith Cooper - I think it was - and Keith Cooper taking him over from me. He eventually, God bless him, worked in Krupps and did huge innovative stuff for them which I'm not sure they ever recognised, but God love him he eventually committed suicide. I was awful sad about it because I felt if there was somebody to keep tabs on him he might have come through

But it was interesting as well. I remember another situation and this lovely young fella, big, tall string of a young fella and a very good QCA. You'd set up three or four interviews for him and alas, he'd not get an offer of a Co-Op job. One day I asked what he was doing wrong at interviews and he quickly said 'Mary, it's my address, St. Mary's/St. Ita's Park' and he offered to move into a friend's flat in the Ennis Road and change his Co-Op application form. The address meant nothing to me as I was not from Limerick but I got the message and said no, I'd get him sorted. I remember at the time Wilo Pumps were after starting out in Raheen and my own husband worked in a factory in Raheen, and he knew one of the lads there. So anyway, I rang this guy in Raheen in Wilo Pumps, I'll never forget it. And 'oh, yes' he said, 'send him out', and that time the Co-op students were getting sixty pounds a week and he started on eighty pounds a week. And I have a lovely memory of him coming in the following day with a six penny bar of chocolate and it was a lovely, lovely gesture. Some students were brats I will admit especially those who came from family businesses and well healed backgrounds.

In Co-Op we had a very good relationship with local and national companies and the Cooperative Education programme was a big hit with employers and many, many students got permanent employment with their Co-Op employers. There was the other side of the coin too, where students would not want to come back to College and finish their degrees, but rather had got used to having a weekly salary and wanted to stay on, but we persuaded them to finish their degrees which most of them did.

There was another angle to it also, in that some students would have failed their exams and were not eligible to go on Co-Op, and would be in 'no man's land' until they repeated their exams. Employers would ring up looking for assembly line workers with a bit of know how, to help complete an order deadline and we would send out these students who had failed exams and they always did a great job and parents would tell you later that it made such a difference to them in that they could see where their course was leading them to, and they never failed an exam again. That was my first interaction I suppose with the student side of the house (I: in the Co-op?) yes in the Co-op side.

We used to have a dance then, at Christmas, and I remember one year going to the dance, I'm not sure that we had set out to go to the dance but as the drinks flowed we decided we were going to go anyway but of course by the time we got out to the dance we had no money and one of the tricks of the trade at the time was the change for a telephone call; so you'd go around and I remember we made the price of two drinks from the first round and then I remember somebody else had a packet of Dunne's tights, I can still see them in the blue box, and we auctioned them and then our night was made, there was a spot prize and we won a bottle of whiskey and of course there was no going back after that, like. Mighty memories like that, absolutely mighty memories like that. Memories coming out on the bus from Cannocks, and you know, talking to people on the bus. I remember several faculty members coming in their first day to the university.

I: Mary you worked in NIHE for a number of years part-time and then you moved to Thomond?.

M.S.: Yes, I then moved to Thomond. I would always have been interested in games and sport generally. I remember being offered the job in Thomond and being promised maybe two points up the scale, and thought oh now, Jim Christian is not going to give me this kind of money, and I remember stalling, stalling before eventually saying yes, and I eventually took the job, not a permanent job I might add. They weren't there at the time; there were just contract jobs.

I have a vivid memory of Thomond students being so different to NIHE students. The students would hold the door for you in Thomond. They were full of devilment, oh my God, they were full of devilment. I mean it wasn't unusual when they'd be in the pool during their practical swimming class to go into the girls dressing rooms and take out their bra and pants and hang them up outside the dressing rooms. They'd then bet on who owned which bra, etc. That time there were a lot of steps at the entrance to Thomond and I remember the Philosophy lecturer had a small blue bubble car and they lifted it from the car park and landed it on top of the steps. These same steps were used for sun bathing when the sun shone.

Thomond was a much smaller outfit I suppose, much more intimate if you like, and you knew all of the PE students. Another memory I have is the student's talent show, when they would take off their lecturers and staff to a packed audience of staff and students. They would basically take you off, and make 'a feck' of you, whether you were the Director of the college or the Registrar, or you were their lecturer, or you were looking after them from any perspective. But a great crew, a great comradeship between them and they always looked after each other on nights out. A great staff as well, when you had to work you had had to work, and it didn't matter if you were there until seven or eight o'clock, you did not leave until the job was finished.

Christmas times around Thomond were always good fun, and there was a big drinking culture on campus at that time you know, and Christmas time always seemed to bring bottles from suppliers and we had the service staff, who used to prepare the sports hall for the practical classes, sort out the goals and the pitches for the outdoor classes and they

had their own little tea room. Dinny was one of the elder guys and he used to do a cooked breakfast in the morning for the boys. Anyway, the tearoom was our hide out for our impromptu Christmas parties. We would all gather there and have a sing song. You'd have Liam O'Doherty on the squeeze box, John O'Donoghue, Paddy Flannery, Michael Bresnihan, Austin the poet, great sessions, great drinking sessions. We'd always end up in the Parkway which was the 'in' place at the time, and I remember one evening finishing up in Thomond and heading for the Parkway with a half bottle of Haig and we couldn't understand why the hotel wouldn't give us a pint jug of water and glasses, so we could drink our bottle of Haig, memories like that, you know.

Students were good kids; they were, dare I say, they certainly were different from NIHE kids. They were probably well heeled kids, I would say we had quite a few of Dublin 4 type kids. That time the fellows used to wear leotards and there's a story told of two very prominent sports people, I probably can't mention their names, I suppose, but they had a dance assessment. Teresa Leahy was their dance tutor at the time and part of the assessment was that they had to make up their own dance. So they were very, very smart altogether, they got two army coats and decided they would wear nothing inside the two army coats, so they did this fabulous routine and flashed the coats open every so often to a huge ovation of course. So the tutor decided, this can't be possible, they're just making this up as they go along. So she insisted that they do it again. So the whole audience were chuffed to pieces because they were doing the same thing again flashing with their overcoats and nothing on inside them. But great scenes then as well,

I remember Joanne Moles in particular, was very conscious of the fact that we had a swimming pool there. She used to bring in small little kids and with our students teach them to swim, in a fun situation rather than the wee kids paying out money and under pressure to learn to swim. And there used to be gymnastics and an interesting thing about the gymnastics. There was a local, actually she was ex-Thomond, a PE person who to do gymnastics for a fiver per child. And I remember thinking, God almighty, a lot of kids can't afford that, we'll get students to do it and we arranged for students to do it at a pound per student but Castletroy being Castletroy, no, we didn't get anybody for a pound,

they preferred to go for the five pound session. They probably felt they were getting better tuition, but that was the way Castletroy was at that stage..

I: Was it difficult to get into Thomond, for students?.

M.S.: I don't remember much of that side of it actually at all. I knew there were interviews and there was a movement ability test and later, when the points system came in, you did not automatically get a place as you had to pass the movement ability test first. At that stage, they had got rid of the interview but if you failed the movement ability test and even though you had the points, you just did not get in. If you failed swimming you were gone – no place for you. But that's all changed now and because places are scarce, points are high, which does not always reflect the right type of student for teaching.

Many schools at that time reckoned they already had PE teachers but in essence what they had was coaches i.e. rugby coach, hockey coach, GAA coach, but just tough luck if your child did not make the school team in these sports you virtually had no PE. And it used to drive me mad when you'd ask a visiting mature person what are you doing now?, I'm teaching PE in Dublin. But I used to say you couldn't, because you're not qualified, you didn't come through Thomond, and you'd discover they'd have done a PLC course and become a rugby coach. But fortunately, one of our own Thomond people is now a cigire and he is doing great work on that side of the house in getting rid of coaches and putting in PE people. Anyway, I'm going off on a different train, I shouldn't be going down that road, but a kind of a pet hate of mine.

I: What did you work at in Thomond Mary?.

M.S.: Administration.

I: Administration, but not in Student Services?.

M.S.: In supporting Faculty I suppose really, typing college notes for the students and servicing the Faculty side of it.

I: Was the same good relationships ... among the staff in Thomond that you described in NIHE?.

M.S.: We would have, except maybe for one or two of the senior ones. I remember there were one or two English lecturers there at the time and they were a kind of a bit foreign to us, in that they used to dry their nappies in our offices, which we found out of order but did not complain. But having said that, we used to come in the odd morning and were free to go to the changing rooms and have our showers, if needs be, so I suppose we too took advantage of the situation too.

I: So it was a relaxed atmosphere there as well?.

M.S.: It was, I suppose, but lunchtime was a totally different scene to NIHE; in Thomond you either played squash or you went for a swim, or a walk, the pub was not on the agenda at all at all. But then maybe we had got more sense ourselves as well.

I: Was Thomond separate to NIHE ?.

M.S.: I suppose there was a bit of 'them and us' in it alright. We had dealing with certain areas of NIHE like finance and personnel but mostly we reckoned we were very separate, knew the girls in Finance to a lesser extent I suppose, and knew the people in Personnel. Now having said that, we had our own level of finance control up to a certain level, but I think ultimately, we were guided by what was happening in NIHE. Personally, I had two great friends from my NIHE days, Avril Hogan and Marion Healy, and we stayed friends all the way through. One of our high profile students at that time was Irish rugby player Tony Ward and I distinctly remember the girls in Student Services would say to you, if he comes in now, you ask him his name, even though you'd see him on the telly every

week. You always had to make sure he didn't get a big head but the awful thing was, he wasn't a bit like that.

My contract must not have been renewed then, and my next episode was in the early 1980s, again on contract basis with Liam Dugdale in In Service Education. Oh Liam was a gentleman, he's since dead, he died in 1994, and was an awful loss to PE, not alone in Thomond, but in Ireland. We were running courses for teachers and I used to do a lot of work from home and come in then at weekends to run the courses. Course fees, apart from usual morning and afternoon teas, would include lunch, which was part of my brief to organise. I engaged my friend Marion and another girl, Ann Madigan, in NIHE at the time, to do the catering for me and it was not unusual on a Saturday morning to see the girls cooking chicken or whatever, upstairs in the Schroedinger Building. You see there was no Campbells or there was no Lodge Hotel or Castletroy Park and I suppose money was scarce as well. We used to get wine from a local fellow who used to make his own wine and we had some scary moments with the wine. I remember one of the porters drank it and was out sick for six weeks after it, but thankfully none of the teachers had a reaction to it. Maybe the wine wasn't fermented properly or something, but I often look back on it and think about the Health and Safety and Hygiene aspects today, but thankfully we had no complaints from our clients

I: This was for the teachers in- service training?.

M.S.: Yes, I suppose you would call it upskilling of teachers who had qualified some years previous. We had annual Chemistry, Maths and PE conferences, all of which were very popular and very well supported. We even hosted the world PE Conference which was a huge event with teachers from all over the world. That was a week end conference and I worked all through the night to get the Conference Booklet out in time for the printers. I'll never forget the Conference Dinner as we were sat at the table beside Germans, Spanish and French and they could all communicate with my husband and I in English, but alas, we had none of their languages. I felt it was a big draw back in our education system.

Then NIHE became a University, and of course, next up was the amalgamation of Thomond. The run up to that scene was horrific in Thomond. Terrible stress, rumour, and meetings with no definite information as to what would become of us. As it happened, we need not have worried, because we were just as efficient if not more efficient than many departments in UL at the time.

I: This is in administration?.

M.S.: Yes on that side of the house.

I: Mary, there were other subjects beside PE then of course, in Thomond?.

M.S.: Yes, there were. You had the Woodwork students and you had the Metalwork, and you had the Rural Science kids. The PEs were called the Sweaties and the Woodworks were the Chippies. The Chippies and the PEs seemed to get on very well, there was a lot of interaction between the two of them. Mostly I think, because of the games side of the house. A lot of the Chippies were good at hurling and actually I remember one young fellow lost an eye after hurling training. Tommy Cohen, he was the Galway goalkeeper at the time and they were messing with the sliotar after training, and he got a belt of it in the eye. It worked out very badly for him, he never got a halfpenny insurance wise off it, and then his girlfriend got pregnant and they both lost a year out of college and their grants, but thank God they both managed to come back with the baby and finish college. Full credit to Jed in the Hurlers who looked after them financially to a certain degree.

The Chippies, I would know more about them as such, because as I say, there would be interaction with them from a games viewpoint.. But they used to make fabulous stuff, furniture, toys, etc. and we would have a viewing day to see all their handy work. They were usually very talented and artistic. At that stage, PE faculty were involved in coaching student games and they would give of their time after classes to train, coach hurling, football, tennis, athletics – in fact all College teams and also attend their games.

Usually Wednesday afternoons were class free for games. Then at the end of each academic year we would have games students versus staff and they would be eagerly awaited and the odd time, get out of hand, with nasty tackles and the like, but not very often.

Of course we had a lot of students who have since become famous – students like Ronan Tynan who went from PE to medicine and then to singing. Ronan was difficult enough in Thomond, bit spoilt I'd say, and demanded a lot of attention. On the sports side we had very many apart from Tony Ward and Thomond boasts of the only senior football team from Limerick to win an All Ireland Club Final in Croke Park . Then we had Seanie McGrath, who had a leg and a half thanks to Jaws, as he used to say himself. But he was a great swimmer and forever training. Seanie went to the Seoul Olympics and won a Bronze medal and it clashed with his graduation. I remember being involved with Jacinta Duffy, the late Jacinta would be Jacinta O'Brien, and we organised a helicopter, her dad helped us as well, from the airport in Cork to bring him to Thomond for his graduation. I remember his class would not process until the helicopter arrived and he got a huge standing ovation at graduation. His mum and auntie had brought his suit for the occasion but the shoes could not be found so he has the distinction of being the only student to graduate in a pair of runners. Seanie is now a Cigire and doing great work for PE and a super character. We had many great female stars on the hockey front as well and very many of our PEs are now school principals.

I: Was there a gender balance or was it mostly men?.

M.S.: No, females tended to make up the majority of classes in each year. The lads used to say they were too busy training for their particular sport to put in as much study as the women. When we went into the University, Liam Dugdale was made Head of PE and we were all delighted and I was his Secretary and general 'dogsbody' in the Department.

As each batch of first year students would arrive on campus I used to have to chat with them, explain the timetable, talk about absenteeism and especially drinking in the stables.

That time you'd encourage them not to drink shorts and if they had to drink make sure it was beer or Guinness. How times changed so quickly as later they were all seasoned drinkers. I used to have a special message for the girls, to be aware of our fourth year male students, but as times moved on I used to have to also warn the first year boys about the fourth year girls. Lads with county jerseys were a big hit in any year with the girls. But Liam was great with students in that he demanded respect from them and got respect from them. He worked an open door policy for students, which was a great help. He knew them all by first name as we all did. We used to socialise together as well and we always had a freshers night out as it was important for them because they were in awe of the situation that they found themselves in.

I: You had Music there as well, didn't you?.

M.S.: Oh we had, we had Dr. Rush, a gentleman to the core. We had beautiful musical recitals and music was part of the elective options. You see, you studied a subject area with PE and Education i.e. Irish, Chemistry, English, Geography and Maths. Like NIHE, the students went on teaching practice to local schools, which was great experience for them. I suppose my Thomond years were the happiest of all my working life as we had great students who were well rounded and caring, and I learned so much from them which helped me in rearing our own children. We shared their problems with them, whether it was a granny or a parent who had died, or an unwanted pregnancy and in the latter years we had a super chaplain in Fr Somers. He was unbelievable, and there would be standing room only at his Masses in Milford Church. We had plenty of chancers too, but likeable ones. Monday mornings, especially after a County Final the previous day, my phone would be hopping with excuses for being absent. However, they knew that they dared not tell me a lie, i.e. that a granny was very ill or the like, as I detested lies and they knew they would be in the dog house if they did not tell the truth. I'd always encourage them to play sports while in college, and I was very involved with UL Hockey for many years, but of course the men's sports had a higher profile those years and much as we tried, we never did win the Intervarsity Cup.

We used to have an annual Thomond Ball and that was a hugely glamorous affair and the army students would be in uniform which added to the night. There would be many sports presentation on the night and these would be eagerly looked forward to.

Our students had a great reputation throughout the country, and schools would ring you with their vacancies and if it was near exam times the interviews would be held in Thomond, and on many occasions, jobs would be secured even before final exams would be completed. At that stage too, many Irish students went to the UK to qualify but our students would also come out on top in interview situations.

Another thing I used to do, is to bring in transition students for 'work experience'. I felt this was necessary because there was a perception that PE students kicked a ball around all day and that was PE. The second level student would be introduced to a first year PE student and a special timetable given to him so that he or she would experience both the PE, education and elective areas. This arrangement worked well with local schools, as they in turn would take our PEs on teaching practice.

Then a new course was introduced i.e. Sports Science, which was led by Professor Craig Sharpe, a most wonderful man from the UK. This was a new departure in Ireland and added another dimension to the PE department.. A very popular course, as such, but not many people in Ireland knew what Sports Science was about, and the big question was where the jobs would come from. But thank God it took off, and with so many dimensions to the training and coaching of county, provincial and national teams, our students were beginning to be at the forefront of these coaching jobs.

I: Mary just to go back to NIHE. It was a much, much smaller institution with a much smaller staff, what were working conditions like?.

M.S.: Working conditions were good, we had a very strong union at the time I must say, I'm not quite sure what it was called, it's now IMPACT, but think it was MSF before that. We always got the National Wage Agreements and initially there were lot of

problems with contracts and temporary staff. We were a very new establishment and a lot of our academics had come from established UK scenes and if there was one criticism I would have it is that it was the same union for all grades, secretarial, faculty, porters, groundsmen, etc. Job descriptions and promotional outlets and grading were always up for negotiation and a lot of man hours spent on trying to get it right. I'll always remember, we obviously weren't getting our way with some aspect of negotiations through the union and very smartly, I think Marion Healy was involved in it, there was a union meeting called at half four on an evening, and purposely the meeting went on later than five o'clock, which was closing time. Like everything else, there were always leaks to management after union meetings, so this time, this was not possible as offices were empty come five o'clock, and the union had called for a sick out the following day. This was hugely successful as we all rang in sick the following morning and management had to act. Marion Healy was the bane of the then Personnel Managers life and he was quite happy to see her go to higher things in Scotland as the years went on.

Oh, one of the things I should have said about Plassey House was a distinct memory, up on the top of Plassey House, they had a rest room, which is where there was a bed and lovely sheets and everything. But if you were very, very hungover and hit that place, the flowers and the sheets began to attack you. I also forgot to mention about Thomond, perhaps it can be put in perspective afterwards, is my first interview in NIHE was up in the top of the White House as well, with an electric typewriter. I had come from the old Royal typewriter and this was an electric typewriter and the minute I turned it on it just jumped all over the place, I remember Avril Hogan and Aileen McCarthy, were the two people doing the interview or speed test in shorthand and a writing test. I always remember the typing test was on about a pneumatic drill and I thought, oh my God, here I am like, hoping to get into a third level institution and we're talking about a pneumatic drill!. And I couldn't understand it at all. . But I have memories of many wonderful people too, like Doreen O'Dwyer and Leslie, I can't remember her second name, Anne Lyons, Mary Keyes, Mary Guilfoyle and I could go on and on – some no longer with us, alas..

At this stage, we now had our own canteen for staff and students and we had a great rapport with staff. At morning coffee, you could nearly tell them what you wanted for lunch. Fridays used to be a nightmare for staff as Avril was a very finicky eater and poor Molly in Campbells (she worked in the Printroom later), used to have to re cook the omelette about five times.

I: The graduations, Mary, for the NIHE were held in one of the lecture theatres?.

M.S.: They were at that stage, the graduations were a big social occasion in NIHE. I don't know what way it worked, whether each department was allowed a budget for such occasions, to treat the students maybe and the parents. But you'd be invited, well you'd be asking each other well what party did you get invited to, and you'd be very selective in the ones you'd go to, it depended on what was available in terms of drinks and foods. I suppose it was management's way of saying thank you to staff at the end of another academic year. But those parties would go on well into the evening after graduation.

In Thomond then, it was more low key, the graduations used to be held in the Sports Hall. You would have the Chairman of the Governing Body doing his thing and the Director of the college saying his few words and Dr. Rush, the music man, would be there but I don't ever remember any receptions like NIHE. I think the Director used to have a glass of wine or a glass of spirits in his office but it was very much for his Governing Body people. As time went on, I introduced Irish coffee in my own office or Baileys or something like that, and as we got up in the world. I remember my Head of Department bought a fridge, so we had someplace to put the drinks and not have them on display. In the latter years then, we used to have a reception for the students and the parents in the Sports Hall, just cheese and wine, we used to buy in from Fine Wines, whoever gave you the best deal basically but then drinking-driving came in of course and it killed all that, which was probably no harm either but it was a nice occasions to meet the parents.

I: Mary thanks very much for talking to me.

M.S.: Not at all.