

# ORAL HISTORY

I was born in Otter River, April 10, 1916. I was delivered by Dr. Oscar Roberts who was still practicing 50 years later (He cared for my children when they were little)

I was the last of a family of seven children, the oldest being 25 years older than I, the youngest, six years older. My brother Francis called me "rattles, proddles and ki-rattles". My sister Nellie wanted to call me "Rose", my mother wanted to call me "Lenore Elaine" which my sister considered too elegant. They compromised by opening the family bible to the story of Ruth - whence my name. Anne was after my mother's oldest sister.

We moved to Schenectady, New York when I was still a baby. All I recall of living there was a green rug on the floor. I remember my mother sending me out with my sister Mary to play. <sup>Mary</sup> She showed me out the door and left me on the street alone. A big dog, probably a Collie, came along and I had my arms around its neck, trying to get it, when my mother rescued me.

I can't remember moving back to Otter River, but it must have been in 1919 when my father bought into the Otter River Laundry of which he was president until 1933. We used to take the train on a Friday night or Tuesday during the year and travel to Cobleskill, New York for the week-end. My father was an inveterate traveler, my mother went along for the ride. In Cobleskill we visited my Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Bill Coakett. They had three boys, Connor, Dick (Father Basil) and Francis. My Aunt Anne Babard and my Uncle Tom Halloran lived nearby, too. Our Uncle John and Aunt Julia lived in Schenectady. They had two boys, John and Gerald. We also had my mother's cousin, whom we called Aunt Kit and her husband Tom Blanchfield. They had six children, Mary, Helen, Kathleen, Francis, Jimmy

and Tommy. When my Father bought a car we visited them all. We drove over the Mohawk Trail at night arriving Saturday morning, returning for Monday morning. There were all my Mother's relatives whom my Father dearly loved. When I was old enough I spent summer vacations in New York, mostly with Aunt Elizabeth. I had my first real "date" there. A boy, named Billy Smith, took me dancing on the "Shaw Boat" (my Cousin Conner and a girl went along). Needless to say I was thrilled. I had a yellow chiffon long dress. It was the first time I danced with a boy. I think I was fifteen.

My Mother came from Heckmanville, Yorkshire, England when she was fifteen - all alone on a boat. They had bad storms and she was frightened. Her family had preceded her here; they could not afford to bring her along and had to wait until there was enough money to send for her. Her first job in this country was as a maid for a Jewish family in Saratoga. She had to learn how to handle the dishes, pots and pans, foods in the Jewish traditional way. She was not happy doing this and soon returned to her family in Cohasset where she worked in the sweater mills. She knew how to knit as she had made all the stockings for her brothers and sisters since she was a little girl.

She had a friend from England, Mrs. Mullin, who lived in Utter River, Mass. She travelled from New York state to visit with her. There she met my Father who was "taken" by her on sight. He was a dapper young man with a mustache and a derby. He had a horse and buggy in which he courted her. Agnes Kelley told me she was a beautiful Irish lass with black curly hair and rosy cheeks. She had lovely pink skin at eighty.

When my mother returned home my father followed her. He got a job in a foundry in Troy, New York. My Grandmother Halloran did not like him because she thought he was French. But she soon learned to love him because he was so good and kind, a good Catholic and sang with a beautiful, bass voice. (He sang in church for over 50 years). After receiving her consent my parents married. My mother had quite a decision to make between my father and a rich man, a contractor, but finally chose my father. This man is the one who gave my mother the Celery disk for a wedding gift. She cherished that disk and always warned me not to break it. I still have it up in the cupboard. In my early years my Aunt Elizabeth used to point out his big brick house to me and say "that is where you could have lived." I can't remember the man's name but I know I could find the house in Cohoes!

My parents moved back to Massachusetts. They lived in Gardner, where my father worked in a foundry. They moved back and forth between New York and Mass. 16 times in 17 years. He always followed the foundry work. Finally they bought the house in Otter River from Charles Gammell's father (Dellie married Charlie). He had built it as a bachelor, I don't think he ever lived in it. The land belonged to the Stones who owned the Otter River Foundry where my father now worked. They kept the house and rented it out when they moved. I made an error - they bought the house from Quincy Lewis who moved to Alaska. <sup>my Gammell built it. Helen's grandfather.</sup> They always had the houses to come back to. Marian Greenwood said to me when we left Otter River the last time: "You'll be back. Sharron"

always come back to Otter River!". Marion was  
the mother of my best friend, Dorothy Gates. They  
were descended from the Stone family who received  
Otter River <sup>as a grant</sup> from the King of England for fighting  
the Indians so well. The original Stone could  
have all the land he could walk around from  
sunup to sunset. It is said he rode around  
on a horse for he surely acquired a lot of land.  
Our house was on a portion of it. It used to  
have a maple orchard from which they made  
maple syrup.

From 1919 on I lived in the same house in  
Otter River until I left it to marry John J. Kerrigan  
of Gardner in 1937. St. Martin's church was across  
the street from us and the rectory was next door.  
My father and family were always great friends  
with the priest. In the early years priests had  
to drive by horse and buggy to Royalston to say  
mass - leaving at 5:30 A.M. My father used to get  
up and drive with them so they wouldn't have to  
go alone. One Sunday, very cold, the horses covered  
with rime and ice so that they looked like white  
snow horses, the priest turned to him and said  
"I wish the bishop had to take this ride once in a  
while."

I led a pretty sheltered life. My mother just  
did not associate with the people in Otter River,  
except the O'Briens. (He was part owner of the Paper  
Mill.) Therefore, I wasn't allowed to cross the road  
and go "up street" as we called it until I was well  
along in years. Of course my sister Mary made my  
parents more cautious with me. She used to run  
away to play with the kids. One day she ran in front

## ORAL HISTORY

of an auto and was hit. Her collar bone was broken. They say I cried and cried and said "my poor Mary is all broke". I was allowed to play with Dorothy after I started school. We lived on the same side of the road so could walk back and forth. Nellie took me to school my first day. I cried and clung to her, not wanting to stay. She showed me into the schoolroom and shut the door! I soon became accustomed to the new routine and loved school. After Nellie stopped bringing <sup>me</sup> to and fro from school, Miss Walsh, my teacher, who lived down the road, picked me up every morning. Oh, I was so protected. We walked behind the church and through the field to school. I guess Jack and Peter went the same way when they started school in Altex River for the five years we lived there.

I am sure I knew how to read before going to school as I used to read newspapers and signs. I can remember seeing TOILET which I thought said "Toilet". It was not long before I caught on. I thought when one read in school one said one word slowly, one at a time. - That's the way the kids did. But one day, when Mr. Jones, the superintendent, was visiting first grade I just let him rip and said all the words as they were written one after another - I really was reading. The teacher (Miss Harrington) and Mr. Jones were amazed. They decided I was too smart for the first grade and off I went to the second! A big mistake - I was always with kids a year older than I. And I was shy and bashful to begin with.

My sister Mary made up for me, tho' she was forward and aggressive. When Mr. Hamilton

at the store tried to give me candy I wouldn't take it - she'd poke and shove me until I did so she could get it away from me outside! I must have been a thorn in her side - to think she had been the baby until I came along and usurped her place. My brother Freddie, who played the violin, whacked her on the head with the bow every time she got near him when he was practicing. One day she broke his bow! He was my Godfather and he took it seriously. He put money in the bank for me. He took me to the dentist, he took me to visit his girl friends. When he married I was their child and took care of their babies when they came.

I grew up doing the housework and taking care of my mother - she was often ill - had high blood pressure. From 14 on I was in charge of the house. My sister Mary had married at 18. <sup>NOTE</sup> She eloped with Mike Martin much to my parents' dislike. Guess why they didn't like him? He was French! They promptly had four children whom she periodically brought home to Grandma - only it was actually me. Poor Mike died young and <sup>NOTE</sup> Mary at 28 had four kids to support which she nobly did and educated them well.

Not to brag, but I had the highest I.Q. in the state so school was rather easy for me. In High School I loved the languages, Latin and French. Math was my bugaboo. I went to business college in Worcester for a while but my mother was ill and I was needed at home and money was scarce in the 1934 - and on.

When I met John - he was Irish - a must  
in our house. He was going to College in  
Alabama - he really impressed me. We met  
on a blind date and went together three years  
before we married. Part of the time he was at  
school, then he got a job in Philadelphia where  
he was working. After being separated so much  
it was time to marry or else. When he came  
home for Christmas he had a diamond for me  
and we made the arrangements for the August  
wedding. Before I got the ring I wore his Frat  
pin which was big deal in those days.

After our wedding we went to live in  
Philly for a short time until he was transferred  
to Baltimore. He hated B. - I loved it. He was  
ill for a few months and so we moved back  
to Otter River where we lived with my parents.  
They really needed me. Jack was born there.  
My parents really loved him - it was like they  
had a new child. He called my mother "Bummie"  
and my father "Mr. Bummie". He tagged after my  
mother everywhere he went - even shoveling snow.  
He called me "Ruth" and Dad "John". When he  
was there we moved to the Bronx. My parents  
were heartbroken but John's job called. Peter  
was born in the Bronx. Jackie used to go out  
and tell everyone of the children around - "Ha-ha  
I've got a baby brother". We spent the summer after  
his birth in Otter River at Grandpa + Grandmother.  
Peter learned to walk at ten months. He had his  
1st birthday in Otter River.

Pete was broke out in 1942-43  
while we lived in the Bronx. John got transferred

back to the Gardner factory. It was hard to find places to live compared to our N.Y. apartment. We finally found a rather decent small one at 140 Woodlawn Ave owned by the Partes who were so good to the boys and us. \$40.00 a month!

Before we left New York (I'll never forget that Dec. 7, 1941) we had to have light proof blinds on our windows, sand and water on the roof in case a bomb fell. The streets were patrolled by volunteers every night. If a light came thru a blind they'd knock on the door and tell us. Mr. Kieffer, who owned our apartment, told John that if one fell on the roof he could go put it out because he was "going to run like hell". We saved all our Tex cans, washing and crushing them. We had an air raid signal one night. We were supposed to get under tables or go down cellar. Another time we had a day-time air raid. John got on the subway and came home from the city. He expected to find me frightened to death (as he was) but the two boys were taking their nap and I was having one on the couch. He was really glad to leave New York City and I hated to. It was really unnecessary. Had we stayed on we probably would never have ended up in Pennsylvania! Going back to Gardner delayed his job status for ten years. Ten long years living in Gardner and Otter River before we moved to Huntington, L.I. The boys had good times in Otter River, tho'. They could go to the swimming pool, ride their bikes in the country, go on the bus to the movies. School was close by. And we had Grandma for a while - she watched over them like a mother hen.

## ORAL HISTORY

Peter didn't want to leave Otter River - he wanted to live with my sister Mary who bought the family homestead from me. But he soon made friends in Huntington. He didn't want to leave there but he soon had a lot of friends in Reading and played in all the sports - even football, where he got a separated shoulder. He was a basket ball star. Jack was off at college in Worcester - Holy Cross. We were still in New York when he left. The first week he was gone I cried my eyes out - but come Friday night in, he walked he had taken the train home for the week end! I guess he was as lonesome as I was. It was harder to get to Reading. Sometimes we picked him up in Allentown at two o'clock in the morning. Other times in Lancaster.

The first year we lived here we had lots of company, more than this house could handle and feed. Keywood-Wakefield went on strike the first three months we were here. We had to spend a lot of the profit we made on our house in Huntington just to live. Mary and Catherine made their one and only visit here in 1957. It is now 1983 and they pretend they are coming but I know they won't. Mary never forgave me for taking her brother away from her. Just, Mamie, Grandpa's wife took him - then her beloved brother. I promised to her for 25 years - then I'd had it and let her have a few pieces of my mind. Ah, well! She loved Jack and despised Peter and does to this day, I guess! The reason I let my temper go at her was because she started criticizing my children and that did it. Catherine, John's sister, was brought up by Aunt Kate and Uncle Jerry Sheehan. She had a wonderful home. Uncle Jerry gave her everything - even a car. When he died in 1939 or 40

it was a terrible blow to her. Mary went to  
live with them and her life was never the  
same. Mary had to be the boss. Catherine had to sell  
her car; Mary bought one for the family (John + Catherine).  
Once when I was ill and in the hospital John had  
to use it but he had to bring it back to Mary every  
night until he was exhausted. What did it - he said  
he'd never be without a car of his own again and  
he went out and bought a used car (Ford). What  
didn't set too well. Of course there were times when  
she was good to us, then there were times when  
she didn't come near us for periods of two years.  
I could write all the nasty things she did but I  
guess I won't. At my sister Nellie's funeral, Feb 14,  
1984 she saw Peter and told us how handsome he was,  
and what a wonderful figure he had. She was sorry  
that he hadn't come up to see Catherine, his Godmother,  
because she would have been happy to see him.  
So, I guess blood is thicker than water.

1892 Our Sister and Aunt 1984

Helen Elizabeth Sharrow Gammell died February 11th, 1984. She was born June 10, 1892. I think she was the first women's libber there was. She graduated from Templeton High School just before she turned 17. After high school she went to the Hitchburg Business College. Every morning she walked to the Otter River station to take the train to Hitchburg, rain, snow or sleet. It must have been over a mile. When she graduated she took a job in East Templeton at a tricycle factory in the office. She rode the trolley over there. It's hard for me to remember all the things she did. Because she was so much older than I. In my autograph book she wrote "Twenty five years before you were, I was". Our family moved to Schenectady, N. Y. where she got a job as secretary to Mr. Chas. Proteus Steinmetz, a famous German electrical engineer and mathematician and inventor. He wrote many books and was also a professor at Union University.

All this time she had a "boy-friend", Charles Gammell. Theirs was a true romance, she followed him to Schenectady and she visited with his family back in Otter River, even though one of the big manufacturer's sons in Gardner wanted to marry her she still stuck to her Charlie. When World War I broke out, Charlie enlisted, he wanted her to marry him before he went over seas but she insisted on waiting until he came home. Her prayers were being answered even then because the day before he was to be sent to the front from Marseilles the war was declared over and he came home safe and sound. I can barely remember him in his uniform

We had left Otter River in  
at our house in Schenectady. 1916, after my birth.

In 1919 we moved back to Otter River  
from whence we never left again. When John  
and I moved to Long Island, Marion Greenwood  
said, "you'll be back, Sharrows never leave  
Otter River for long."

Nellie and Charlie lived on Main Street  
in their new apartment (I don't know what they  
called them then - probably "tenements"). Work was  
hard to find after the war so they traveled every  
week to Athol where they both worked at Starretts.  
She in the office, he in the factory. They came  
home every week end. They had a lovely home,  
I used to love to go there.

They both wanted children so badly,  
but Nellie lost 13 to miscarriages. My Mother  
told me she suffered terribly with back loss.  
Finally they had a baby boy, born in the  
Winchendon Hospital. He lived only a few days  
They said he was a beautiful child, but I  
have been told Nellie was a hemophilic  
carrier and could never have a living boy.  
Today things would have been different with blood  
transfusions.

When she went to work in the Otter  
River Houndry as bookkeeper where my Father  
had bought in - he was the President of the  
Company. Charlie worked for Thompsons in  
Baldwinville, Mass. Nellie made my dresses - the  
last one I remember was pongee and she embroidered  
two large flowers on the skirt. She had long black  
braids that she could sit on. I used to love to un-  
braid them and play with her hair. And the mystery

## ORAL HISTORY

is she'd let me.

Nellie was also a musician. She was organist and soloist in church from the time she was sixteen years old. I honestly don't know how she accomplished all the things she did. Then Nellie and Charley bought the old Donahue house at the corner of Gardner Road and Pleasant St. They had a lovely home; it was always neat and shiny. It was near the church where she played the organ at two masses every Sunday and she played the funerals and weddings too. My father was the bass soloist and Belle Gammell Donegan (Charlie's only sister) was the soprano soloist. They sang well together. I shall always remember Belle singing "Pans Angelicus" and my father singing "O, this Day, Oh Beautiful Mother" the day I was married.

Finally they had a baby girl, Mary. She was a beautiful child, too, blonde. She used to love to tag around after me. Then they had Helen several years later. Poor little Mary got pneumonia and died at age nine or ten. Their hearts were broken. At the same time Helen was suffering from double mastitis. Dr. Roberts and I took her to the hospital in Gardner where Mr. Waters said she wouldn't live through the night. But she did and lived in the hospital many weeks. She was the apple of her father's eye.

Then in 1939 Charlie died - dropped dead on the floor. Again we dragged Helen off to the hospital where she stayed for weeks. Grandpa and Father Malloy visited her every day. He had a big bag of silver. Rev. Macey always gave her

a fifty cent piece. I think she was only four or so but she could count that money. Nellie carried on somehow. She had Helen to care for. It was the first winter they lived upstairs in our house but they returned home. As soon as Helen went to school Nellie worked - in the office at the Laundry, at the library, at the church playing the organ and doing the books for the church, too. She brought Helen up on very little money but somehow she managed. She had Patty there half the time - Patty and Helen were like sisters - even when Charlie was alive if Helen got a pair of shoes, Patty got a pair, too. When Mary's husband, Mike Martin, died she took them all in, too. What was the beginning of the downfall of her lovely, sparkling home.

I wish you all could have known her when her house was so lovely. Upstairs were guest rooms that were always made up and ready for company. Freddie used to bring Margaret there when he was courting her and she would stay week-ends. At that time Margaret was <sup>teaching</sup> working in Natick. The living room was so pleasant with the sun shining in all the glittering windows. She always had a lot of geraniums and other plants, too.

I used to love to go over there to play. She'd let me go upstairs and play with all her hats - I particularly remembered a red straw with a wide brim. I could take all the baby clothes out of the ivory chest - I wondered if it's still there? She had pretty dainty aprons and linens there, too. I used to play with

all the jewelry in the drawer in their down-  
stairs bureau. Charlie had a big gold watch,  
also his Father's gold watch. Nellie had her  
pearl engagement ring. Somehow these things  
disappeared - I don't know how.

Then came the era of the cats. They  
really started back when Charlie was blind. He  
always had a "Bebbi" who sat beside him on a  
chair at dinner and was hand fed tidbits. Then  
after little Mary died Helen got a cat - a grey -  
she battled that cat around so it stayed in her  
doll carriage and was dressed up in bonnets  
and dresses. If it tried to leave she'd give it a  
whack and the cat would stay put. Her Father  
played with her every night like another kid.  
His going was a terrible loss to a little child. She  
never mentioned his name for years, as I know  
how she felt.

Helen part of lost interest in everything -  
school wasn't very important to her anymore  
and she was as smart as a whip. We all really  
had to keep pushing her to get her through High  
School - she finally made it and John got her  
a job at Keywoods in the office. She went to  
work with him every morning - he gave her  
orders to be on time and she was. They'd  
stop for coffee and a cigarette in the  
lunch room. She did awfully well in her job and was well  
liked.

Nellie kept house and ordered her  
daughter around to the day she died. Helen was  
all she had left in life and she clung to her.

Nellie liked to travel and go shopping

Almost every week she'd hop on a bus and go to Nitchburg, Worcester or Boston. Our Mother, your Grandmother, used to have a fit every time she took off. She'd say "she'll die on one of these trips". She did those trips until she was a pretty old lady. I shouldn't say that because she never was old. In her casket she looked like a young woman.

She knew every kid in Otter River both from the library and from the choir. When she died the church was filled with many of them who had grown up under her tutelage. She had parties for her choir girls and gave each and every one of them a Christmas present.

When John, Jacob and I moved to N.Y.C. (the Bronx) Nellie had an excuse to visit New York. She took little Helen on the bus and guess what she brought along in a basket (a kitten!) She wanted us to keep it but cats weren't allowed in our apartment. Helen was afraid riding on the subway so Nellie travelled all over by herself. When they left I had to take them in a round about way to Park Avenue Road to get a bus home so she wouldn't have to get on the subway again. When we moved to Long Island the two of them came there, too. I took them all around - even to Jones Beach which Nellie loved. She never did get to Reading, I'm sorry to say.

Mary used to take her riding over Sunday and they'd go out to dinner and to flea markets. She'd have Mary on the carpet about her antics but then she'd make up with her and go riding. She loved to ride. Mary never

## ORAL HISTORY

*Note.*  
knew it but Nellie always kept me informed about her. We were both embarrassed and ashamed and tried to cover up. I guess if it weren't for her kids we'd have washed her down the drain. She broke the hearts of our poor Mother and Father. Once, in a fit of anger at her, Mary, my Mother said "I should have drowned her when she was born." She turned out three wonderful kids in spite of herself. The fourth, poor thing inherited all her worst traits along with those of her Father.

But Nellie loved them all. All her nieces and nephews. And they all loved her. They came from North, East and West to be at her funeral. I was so proud to see them all there mourning her. She would have been proud, too. Dr. David had hosted a dinner for her on her 90th birthday. Many of us were there. Many of us were at Cal's and my 40th Anniversary at Jack's camp, too. He had engineered my wedding, along with my Father. I guess they wanted to send the "baby" off into the world with a grand flourish.

Nellie is buried in St. John's Cemetery in Gardnerville in a grave with her husband Charlie, her daughter, Mary and our Mother and Father Francis. Nellie and Francis were our parents' first family. They said they brought up three families - I was the last, born when they were forty nine years old and the child of three old-age who cared for them and who was with them when they each died. After Renee will never be the same without them. Now will St. Martin Church. God rest their souls in heaven.