

IRMA CORCORAN, BVM

Interviewed by Jeanine Moran, BVM

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Mundelein College
Oral History Archives

J. Moran: Good afternoon. This is Saturday, September 27th, 1997.

I'm about to interview Sister Irma Corcoran, BVM, about her experience and insights relating to the original Mundelein College. I am Jeanine Moran and this is my tape, No. 1, Side A.

Time has passed. This is Wednesday, October 15th, 1997.

Irma and I are beginning again.

I. Corcoran: I have to begin with the Holy Spirit always. Although in a way, I might say, He came into my life rather late. Only when I was doing my doctoral dissertation at ----- University in broken intervals between 1939 and the final date of its publication in 1945. I had really -- I have already forgotten how I started that sentence -- become fascinated by the Holy Spirit. I had needed for the dissertation, as I saw it, which was in the history of ideas that had motivated practically everything I've done in my life! I've always wanted to go back to the beginnings

of anything I was reading or studying. And I was writing on Milton's concept . . . Milton's concept of creation - of man in the beginning. What God had intended man to be. And what man's defection meant in the order of creation. I studied, I read all of the commentaries that were written and were available in 19.. in the period that I have just mentioned. They included the Catholic, Protestant - and that takes in very many - there were Methodists and Baptists and people of all shades of Christian and non-Christian ideas. The religious ones published great compendiums and the method was to quote the chapter of the scriptures you were dealing with and then put down all of the interpretations of those chapters that had been published by seventeen.... oh, about.... I'm not sure exactly when he started reading these things. But, they were very interesting and fascinating. They were based on chapters one and two of Genesis, which were the ones I would need for my Milton study. And they were beautiful. And weren't, for the most part, not radically different - although, as you know, there would be some differences between the Protestant and the Catholic. I read the Arabian, the Jewish, two, three versions of the Jewish ideas, people who did not believe in God at all, a great many different views. But, I loved the way in which they expressed the beginnings of things. And most of them, in one way or another, started out very much

like the beginning of Genesis. The spirit of God moved over the waters, over the deep, over the dark nothingness. It was always the spirit of God over chaos, over nothingness. How things could have come into being. I loved the translation of one of the Jewish ones, over Tohu and Bohu, the dark and the deep.

J. Moran: Irma, I wish I had a video camera. This was one of your great accomplishments. Can you talk to us about some of your other accomplishments while you were a faculty member at Mundelein?

I. Corcoran: Would you like me to start with what Mundelein did to me?

J. Moran: You could start anywhere, yes.

I. Corcoran: Sister Mary Josephina had been my companion at Columbia University, where I was sent after a month of presentation convent in Chicago, waiting for further orders to obtain a Master's degree in English in one year. Now, I had majored in English at what then was the Mount, and which became Clark College, because if I did... now, this is not creditable to the Mount, but in those days, it evidently passed....

J. Moran: (chuckles) I suspected this.

I. Corcoran: I could count my freshman English... anything in English... toward a major. I had decided by that time to enter the novitiate and I would have enough credits for an English

major if I left school in January. I would have had enough for either French or History major with one or two more classes in either. But I would have had another semester in order to get them in, and I felt I owed it to my elderly parents, who would be totally alone after I entered, to give them all the time that I could legitimately give. So, in order to leave in January, I included such courses as my freshman English. And Sister Mary Richard's News Writing, in which she had had six weeks in Minnesota or somewhere, in summer school, and no experience, whatever. My experience was limited to delightful practice with everything I could learn. I had had a... six weeks of a summer session, before I was smashed up in an automobile accident, with feature writing from a young graduate student named George _____. And there were four other people in the class who wrote letters. They had thought news writing, or thought feature writing would be an exciting and somewhat romantic study, and they got into it and they were rather bored by the experiences he had had, which I found fascinating and very helpful. And he then spent a lot of time on them, I absorbed them very quickly, and then we got off into arguments about Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, and all college people were talking about in those days, and they weren't at Clark. But, ah, I read them on my own because I was hearing about them and I had friends in universities. And, ah, it was a

delightful experience. And then, too, in high school I had been the reporter in my senior year for the two county newspapers in town. And the editors were amused by that, and taught me quite a lot of what they knew themselves from their experience. I was one of the high school kids. (Chuckles) And that was about all the preparation I had. And, ah, Sister Mary Josephina did not approve at all of our group having been prepared to go immediately into college work. And she said, "They never put young, inexperienced people into college". And I had no ideas on the subject, I was entering religious life to give whatever I could do with my life to the service of God. And I had gone... been in a very secular atmosphere practically all my life. My parents were very _____ and deeply religious. But, I had been to mass, I suppose, a dozen times in my life before I was in second semester of high school, first year of high school. And I was aware of the need for some foundation... some reason for the things I was expected to know as a Catholic, if I was going to devote myself to God, as the Catholics saw him.

J. Moran: And does this bring you around to thinking that now you're at Mundelein's door... doorstep.

I. Corcoran: This is how I got to Mundelein's doorstep - I had a degree when I finished the novitiate, as four others had... five of us had our degrees when we entered. They have said that

Sister Mary Distestio was a great builder, but no school woman. She was as school woman. That woman had been searching for those she could collect for a faculty at Mundelein. They had to have higher degrees of some sort. And those degrees had to be from universities that would be recognized by North Central. We almost prayed to North Central in those days. And she sent the five of us, as soon as we were professed, she was at Mount Carmel, she interviewed us and sent Sister Mary Francine Jengould and Sister Mary John Michael B. to St. Louis, which was the only coeducational Catholic university recognized by North Central. She sent Sister Mary Columba and Sister Mary John Michael to Ann Arbor. Confidentially, I learned Sister Mary John Michael did not get her Master's because she refused to write a dissertation. And nobody ever knew anything about Sister Mary Columba because she was rather tight-lipped about her experience. She probably... she may have had one, she may have had one already from the University of Iowa, I don't know. She was teaching before we entered the novitiate, even, as a, as a... ah, an ordinary Catholic teacher. And, ah... she sent me to New York, then the largest university in the United States, I think there were thirty-four thousand. Now that's peanuts, but then it was... it was a very large university. And I was the only Sister on the campus, as far as I know, the entire campus. I saw one Sister at

Mercy Abbott. Josephina was from Ireland and she was intensely Irish. I think it was she who... it was either she or her sister, who knelt down in her nightgown in the aisle of the train coming from... from New York to Chicago to say her night prayers. And then it had been very bad. But, anyway, I finished... we went to Harvard after a year. I was sick, I collapsed on a Wednesday after Christmas. I think Christmas was on Saturday or something that year. And I opened the door and came into the room that Josephina and I shared at the _____ in New York, and fell. And I remember the way the side of her bed frame felt, because I scraped it as I fell.

J. Moran: Oh, my!

I. Corcoran: And, ah... I missed six weeks of school. Now, I have not advertised this, I don't know whether anybody knows it or not, I just assumed they wouldn't, it would be such a good thing. I flunked the comprehensive examination that came up.

J. Moran: Would you believe?

I. Corcoran: There were hundreds of objective questions. And, ah... I, ah... there were a lot of this or that _____ things that I could have answered all right, but I didn't. I... I flunked it. And, ah, I had not... I didn't think about the significance of this until recently; I had not finished my Master's essay. They didn't call it a dissertation there. They said it was absurd to

talk about a Master's Degree in one year of study; you couldn't master English in a year of study. And you couldn't do a decent dissertation; you could do a very nice essay. And my essay topic I took was the poet Robert Sevel, who was a young Jesuit, and Saint Theresa's poetry. Well, it's questionable whether she wrote the stuff or not. I mean, it's not great poetry. But, anyway, I took the two of them as a demonstration of a Catholic answer to a Catholic response, at least psychologically, to the Reformation. You see, it was the year of the Reformation, the great year of the Reformation. And I had done as much as I could, possibly, at Columbia, in the time. I got orders on Saint Valentine's Day, when Mona was on her way back from a Catholic Education Meeting at Atlantic City, she stopped with the message. All the time I was sick, within six weeks, I didn't get any response from Mount Carmel or Sister Mary Disticia. I wrote to them, begging them to tell me what to do; there was no answer. There was no money. The _____, the doctor, I think didn't charge anything. He came to see me every day. He said, "You must stop school". The _____ infirmarian said, "You are heart tired, you have to stop". But, I couldn't get any word, I couldn't get permission, I didn't know what to do.

J. Moran: How terrible.

I. Corcoran: And I prayed. If I had been awake twenty-four hours of the day, I would have prayed twenty-four hours. I simply lived by and on prayer all those weeks. And, you know, it had been the most wonderful thing. I thought, what a grace that was and what saints those _____ were.

J. Moran: You accepted it.

I. Corcoran: They were, they were tremendous. They brought me my meals on trays, they prayed for me. And one of the most beautiful things happened. Mother, ah... I know her, don't _____ to slowly... ah, _____, but the things are so terribly necessary to how I met what I went through at Mundelein. And Mother... it was Mother Ida Gray. There was a little more to the name than that, I think. Who was she Superior? And she came to see me from time to time, with little conferences. And she had a very large number of people to take care of in New York.

J. Moran: But she cared about Irma.

I. Corcoran: But she cared about me, and one day toward the end she came and she said, "Sister, I know this has been a very great ordeal for you. And I just want you to know that if your congregation has decided or is deciding that you will not be able to carry on its work, the _____ would receive you with open arms".

J. Moran: What a warm person!

I. Corcoran: What a saint she was!

J. Moran: Yes, and that made all the difference for you.

I. Corcoran: I discovered later that Mother Isabella had been sick and her desk was piled with letters, none of them opened, none of them read, nothing.

J. Moran: Well, that was truly a disappointment for you.

I. Corcoran: Yes, but I had no way of knowing it. All I had any way of knowing was that they were not interested enough to care or to answer my letters. And Mother... and the Superior had written also, and they had ignored her letter and read the thing. And, ah, when the, ah... But, Mona said I was to get up and go back to school, no matter what the doctor said, no matter how I felt. The doctor said, "Absolutely no school". I loved the school, but on... around the middle of February, I got up and went to school. I had ten dollars a semester for expenses. We were to walk to the campus and back for... and it was our morning classes, walk back to the ____.... now remember, this was between 145th Street and 116th... walk back to the ____ for lunch, and then walk back to the campus for our afternoon lunch...

J. Moran: Oh, they couldn't have known...

I. Corcoran: The transportation was five cents a ride, but I had to walk... walk back in the evening. And, ah... there were days... I think of that when I say the fourth of the sorrowful mysteries. Here I say the ____ mysteries in the morning for the people who

work here, and at noon I say it for people who are traveling. And at night I say it for all of us, because it's a glorious set of them, and I have nothing to do but pray away and the writing I'm trying to get done. And all of this had a great effect on my life at Mundelein and still has.

J. Moran: I'm... I'm sure that's true.

I. Corcoran: I could not have survived otherwise. After the close of classes in May at Columbia, we went to Harvard for a month on the _____ that Josephina had thought she might go on in Medieval Literature and she had very pious ideas about English Studies, and she would have made it if she'd tried. Anyway, she wanted to talk to a professor there who was a specialist in Medieval English. And, ah, at the end of the month she decided she wouldn't want to. But, I think we were... I think she was too scared to send it to... makes me a little broader, a little more sophisticated. I had started my life in a Mundelein country school, in a completely Protestant area, and, ah... Harvard was up in _____, they were not coeducational. But at the library, which was new at that time, now it's the old one, they practically tied it up in pink ribbons and gave it to her. I had a carrel in the library, it went from floor to ceiling at that book section, with a desk and shelf and I could... I could reserve books on that shelf for week at a time, and, ah, had the run of

the stacks. I augmented the poor little dissertation, of which I had written part, and I got everything else I needed. I read everything... all of the... I read everything Saint Theresa had written, in Spanish. I had had six weeks of Spanish from an excellent teacher at the University of Iowa, before the accident that put me out of school. And with a dictionary, I got a lot done. And I had read some of her spiritual writing books at the _____, when I was sick. And, ah, I got a love for Saint Theresa that I never lost, and this is her feast day.

J. Moran: This is her day. Exactly.

I. Corcoran: And, ah... I finished the dissertation on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, which has been the mainstay of my life since, the Sacred Heart. And every Friday I wear something red, because if I look at it I remember to pray especially.

J. Moran: Wonderful.

I. Corcoran: And, ah... I finished the Feast of the Sacred Heart and got it off, and I still am thrilled when I remember that day, when I sent the thing out. But I didn't get any answer. And, ah... we went back at the end of the month. During the month the _____ at the _____, who was sure I was dying of tuberculosis, got me out every weekend for a marvelous trip. He was a friend of a woman in the parish who had a Cadillac she was not using for the summer because she had gone to Europe for the summer. And he had told her _____ to keep the car going, that it was better for it

to be used than just sitting in the garage. So, he had permission to take us anywhere, and a very nice woman, a relative of some sort, quite stout and a very nice, Catholic woman. And we went to different places along the coast. I think she did it to make me a little more sophisticated for the people I would have to meet. And when the month was over, we stopped off in New York to pick up my trunk and we came on to Chicago. It was the first of July. The taxi pulled up beside what we called the "little green house". It was a three-story, green, stucco residence with servants' quarters. But it looked like a little, green house, by the skyscraper which had been topped off a half hour before we arrived. It had the topping off ceremony. It had reached maximum height. It would not be habitable until September. But the maximum height was there. In the first year of the Great Depression Sister Mary Distestia had gotten together a faculty we could get by with.

J. Moran: Isn't that remarkable?

I. Corcoran: And a skyscraper. She was a marvelous woman, and I want to yell and cry and raise my fists every time I hear anybody mention... say any implication about her capabilities. She had a trudge straight through and great prayerfulness. And the door of the little green house burst open and Jengould came out and said, "Oh, you just missed the topping off".

J. Moran: Oh... you did.

I. Corcoran: And behind her was Evangela. And Josephina had said Evangela was a large woman, she thought a little pompous, and I'd just have to get used to her, she was going to be the Dean of the college. Evangela was a beautiful woman, you know. Did you know her at all?

J. Moran: I did meet her.

I. Corcoran: With a lovely complexion, and she would get red in the face and laughing and choking. And she said, "I want to welcome you, but I can't kiss you, I'm eating an onion sandwich".

J. Moran: (Chuckles) That sounds like her.

I. Corcoran: That was the pompous woman that Josephina tried to scare me about, but...

J. Moran: That was your welcome.

I. Corcoran: When they brought me in and they wouldn't come... Josephina wouldn't come in, I was thankful to God she wouldn't, I'd had enough of her. And took me up to Sister Mary Disticia, and I confessed to her immediately that I had lost a coin purse containing two dollars. And two dollars would have kept us in potatoes for a week in that house. And she looked at me and she looked right through me and then she said, "Well, Sister, it was an unfortunate accident". And that was all.

J. Moran: Oh! And you expected more?

I. Corcoran: Oh my, yes! Oh, yes! That was a terrible thing to do - two dollars. And then we chatted a moment, and she got someone to take me around the house and to show me where my place would..

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

J. Moran: This is Tape 1, Side Two. Now, Sister Irma, I'm going to ask you what... when you came to Mundelein, what were some of the responsibilities that were put on your shoulders?

I. Corcoran: I think at that point, there was the statement that my _____, there _____ everywhere, because I had to _____ building in which we were living, the community in which we were living, was called a house____. And mine would be the bells. That meant two doorbells, and we at one time had and Sister Mary Distestia a one-way extension in her room. I was... I... I don't remember whether I was assigned the responsibility before or after dinner. She treated me very nicely, I have mentioned the reaction to my lost money at some point, _____. And then she asked someone to show me around the house, the spot I would occupy in the room on the _____ floor. Sister Mary _____ whether to get me a _____ the room. _____, that's what we called one of the Immaculata chairs. They were like the old fashioned ice cream parlor chairs, and they had been given us by Immaculata. So we kept our two sets of collective clothing... clothing on that chair overnight. And she

was probably... I have no idea how long... Well, she celebrated her silver _____ I believe, during that first year, or perhaps already had. And I was out of the novitiate in the year of a sophisticated secular college. She had a peculiar way of speaking. I remember one morning I couldn't find the type of _____ that we wore during the summer, until over her shoulder came, as we were saying the rising prayers, "Holy Mary, mother of God"! And _____. Fortunately, all of us...

J. Moran: (Laughs) Did you catch it?

I. Corcoran: Oh, yes. That group of sixteen sisters had a wonderful sense of humor and we liked each other! We loved each other! And we were a mixed crowd, there were... us, we were the youngest ones. I was... I was twenty-four. And I believe I was the youngest in the group, but I didn't think about it at the time. I thought about those duties and my _____. Most of the duties had to be about upkeep and that kind of thing.

J. Moran: And _____

I. Corcoran: All of us studying and thinking as hard as we could. And, ah, I had to familiarize myself with the voices of the people who phoned. For the people you stopped, they were asking questions about the college, things like that. And you weren't that _____. One of them was very funny. Producers of all sorts sent samples of their wares and then checked up to see if we had

liked them. I have always loathed eggs. I have never told this before. I think you'll have to cut this. As a child, roaming around the neighbors' place, I had opened the door of the wood house, which they used for a smoke house but also partly for a hen house. And I saw a hen lay an egg and it sickened me so that I could not eat an egg from that time on. If I eat an egg it came up immediately!

J. Moran: (Laughs) Oh, I'll bet!

I. Corcoran: And to this day, I loathe eggs, and we have eggs six days a week here, without fail. We have meat one day and sometimes more one, for breakfast eggs. But, the producer sent a dozen eggs... it seems to me it was every day, I associate it with Tuesday in my mind, I don't why. And sent someone back the next day to see if they weren't the best eggs we ever ate. And I used to be both disgusted and amused because if you put enough water with them, you can get enough to serve sixteen people out of twelve eggs, and that would be one - the staple for one meal.

J. Moran: You were that poor?

I. Corcoran: Oh, yes! And Sister Mary Albotona, who was a darling, she was a superior _____ where I had been sent for my month before the university would open. And her family were from Anamosa and I was from Anamosa. Her grand _____ had moved to Cedar Rapids, which she still considered Anamosa, she considered

us sisters. And she was very good, and she sent us a regular fruit carton of that size of grapefruit. I don't know whether it was every week... But she kept us supplied so every one of us had half a grapefruit for breakfast every morning, which was one of the reasons we maintained the health we had.

J. Moran: I bet.

I. Corcoran: And she sent other things whenever enough came in from the parish that there was something to send.

J. Moran: She thought of you.

I. Corcoran: Yes. All... all... all of us.

J. Moran: The group.

I. Corcoran: Of the group. And she appreciated Sister Mary Disticia. And when I was leaving for New York, she had given me pads of paper, like legal pads, and pencils, things that I could use that they had in the school store. And that got me, helped me a great deal. I had to have ten dollars for expenses, and I got along pretty well. I spent... I had to spend \$4.50 for one book and \$5.00 for another, and fifteen cents for shoe polish, the first semester. The second semester, when I was sick, the doctor didn't charge anything, but he had to send for a _____, which showed up, I guess, the _____ that it was discovered by a... oh, you know, the exploratory operation that we _____ and one part of it... the words are escaping me now but it will come. That I had ten years ago in February. And it was a medicine, the

only one they know that will counteract it, had not worked with me. I would have... _____ what would have happened if this was a couple of years later when he left for Indiana. If they hadn't found it and if the medicine hadn't worked for me. Common, ordinary vitamin B6 and vitamin B12 I had taken for years, _____. And, ah, he said, "Your memory would have gotten worse and worse and you would be getting tireder and tireder". I said, "In other words, I'd have turned into a vegetable"? And he said, "Yes, that's about it".

J. Moran: Well, obviously you haven't. Thank God. Thank God.

I. Corcoran: That was ten years ago, in February. Since then, I've published a book that got printed by one of the _____ prize. And the writer of it got a big prize. And, ah... a few other little things.

J. Moran: Whether or not you were healthy, you did those things.

I. Corcoran: But, anyway...

J. Moran: Can we... can we go back to...

I. Corcoran: To the responsibilities.

J. Moran: To... to responsibilities, or maybe you'd like to go on to talking about what you understood to be the mission of the college.

I. Corcoran: Well, I'd like to finish responsibilities...

J. Moran: That's fine.

I. Corcoran: ...because they were a little bit funny. I, ah... answered doorbells, I took all the questions about the college I could, and in the phone calls I would tell, for instance, this amused me very much, and Sister Mary Disticia, and we'd think of each other when she said it, but we didn't go into any detail, but we felt we just knew in the same way when Mr. Epit called, I was to be very courteous and remember everything he said and, ah, if possible I was to deflect him, make him know that anything he said was very important and that we would keep records that it was just impossible to _____ for Sister Mary Disticia... to take her calls, and I got through it somehow. He was reluctant, but he got to give up. Mr. Epit was a cardinal's nephew by marriage.

J. Moran: That places him pretty high.

I. Corcoran: And the _____ rarely called, but I would know his voice and we would tell Sister that he was calling and I'd have to run up to the second floor to tell her. And the contractor called fairly often, but she would coach me ahead of time of what he would probably ask about and what I would answer. And he took it very well, he treated me as though I were the _____ himself. And, ah... if it was a question that I couldn't answer, that she couldn't have foreseen, I ran upstairs and told her and she picked up her phone up there, and that was that. But it was pretty responsible in that some of the calls were pretty impor-

tant and there were sometimes pretty important people calling and asking about the college itself, because a good many donors, all, I think of the upper class students we had that first year had gotten their lower classes, their freshman and maybe their sophomore, were, at least... I don't know, don't remember about the others, if I knew... at eastern colleges, _____mont was particularly a part of that. But they couldn't afford to sent them there, east, anymore, so they sent to Mundelein. And, ah, I have thought, too, with a little bit of Sister Mary Disticia's wisdom and the New York part of it, because at least I had had a year in a... I didn't realize until just when I was working for the oldest intellectual society in the United States and the most prestigious in the East, the American Philosophical Society and the Pennsylvania Historical Society, how much a Master's from Columbia meant. Even today!

J. Moran: Sure.

I. Corcoran: The fact that I had a Master's from Columbia University was a very big thing.

J. Moran: In the year?

I. Corcoran: In 1930, the year of the Great Depression. The night of October 29th, when we were coming back from the campus, there was a terrible excitement everywhere. And at the... and the... other stations which we passed, we couldn't take the train, it

would cost five cents each... But, there was a terrible excitement and people grabbing for newspapers and everything. And we said, "What on earth is the matter". "Didn't you know the stock market has collapsed, utterly? A man just jumped in front of that train that just went by". Another man had gone to the garment district, which was very, very crowded, and jumped off into the heart of the traffic. There were suicides all over. It was dreadful! And we walked on to the _____ and, ah... it was awful. Well, anyway, to go back to Mundelein... _____ When I had finished college in January, so I would have that last semester with my parents, the secretary of a very great lawyer in town had to go back to Tennessee because her husband was transferred back to Nashville. All the stenographers in town were running to get that job, and I went down and applied for it. My mother said, "Why don't you go down and see about it, anyway"? And I, with no experience in that kind of work, but with the two years of shorthand and typing I had taken in high school because I was going to... in addition to the college course... because I was going to be a foreign correspondent in Spain. I had been a very good typist. At Clark I didn't do much typing except my own papers, if I could get a typewriter. And papers for the nuns who couldn't type, or couldn't type decently, and handed papers they wanted over to me to type! And it was... it was pretty good for

me, too. But, anyway, "I warn you", I said, "now, I've had no professional experience, Mr. Chamberlin". But I was a good typist when I finished the two years we were in Anamosa. And I suppose my shorthand was very rusty, I hadn't been using it except for my personal use. But, it was good when the classes were over. And he said, "Well, I would prefer having someone who could work on my briefs and things like that. And if I need another typist or a more experienced one, I'll have access to the bank's pool". He was First Vice President of this bank in town. And so he said, "We'll see how it goes. You be here Monday morning at 9:00".

J. Moran: How nice.

I. Corcoran: And he was so nice. He was a world traveler. He was a fine amateur musician. He, ah... owned a whole suburb of... near the old Park, in... well it... my memory just frightens me, when things like this...

J. Moran: Do you want me to turn this off?

I. Corcoran: Roselle Park. And, ah...

J. Moran: I don't think we got that name on here.

I. Corcoran: Roselle Park, New Jersey. He sold it on one of his trips to New York, the whole suburb. And I spent a day writing deeds for all Roselle Park, New Jersey. I had occasion to go

through it on a train one time, and I looked out over it and I thought, once I handled the deeds of all this town!

J. Moran: Remarkable. What an experience.

I. Corcoran: It was a great experience. And on the same journey on which he had sold that suburb, that portion of the city, he had stopped with friends overnight in Chicago and they had gone to a concert, and he was called out at the intermission to learn that a strip of land he owned in downtown Chicago had been sold for \$375,0000. And that was the first deed I wrote when we got back to Anamosa. And the experience of this and seeing how these people thought and what they did and what they owned and all, didn't do me any damage when I was teaching college in Chicago, and meeting parents and _____ and people.

J. Moran: No, that gave you credibility. Yes.

I. Corcoran: But, the first year of the college, four of us young ones, Sister Mary Francine, Sister Mary Madalena, who had entered... who was a freshman when I was a senior at Clark, and I had felt sorry for this kid who was so homesick that we have become good friends... And Jengould, who had her degree, and I were appointed assistants to Sister Mary Angelita, who was to set up the publications that would open the second semester of the college. And they were our principal public relations' advertising. We sent copies of a magazine, which came out every... four

times a year, and the poetry anthology, which came once a year, and the newspaper, which was every two weeks, I think, to every house in the community. The sisters were advertising what this BVM college was doing in Chicago.

J. Moran: Sure.

I. Corcoran: So we were getting a sprinkling of students from Oklahoma and Arizona and California, and it looked very good in the newspapers. Any news item about so and so, such and such, you know. And, ah, we did work regularly until three in the morning, in the office, because we were all teaching, you know. And, ah, we'd have a pitcher of cocoa or coffee, nice and hot, at eleven or 11:30 at night, and rolls... or something with it.

J. Moran: (Chuckles) So you could continue working.

I. Corcoran: And so we could go to communion the next day. And we worked until two, and then we took Sister Mary Angelita up to her room and she went to bed, and then we went back and cleaned the office. And God help us if there was a speck on the floor or a desk or anything. We had a big classroom for an office, it was very good. And, ah, that went on through the year. And at the end of the year, we had a hilarious party, just among ourselves.

J. Moran: I don't know how you didn't collapse.

I. Corcoran: Taking of... Well, we nearly did one time. I came out of the chapel after night prayers and Sister Mary Disticia caught us and we went over and she said we had worked so hard that we

were going to have our own celebration on our own. And so we went to the office and the tables were laid out for the four of us and Sister Mary Angelita and Sister Mary Disticia - a napkin and ice cream and cookies. And we were dead on our feet, we had been up practically all night.

J. Moran: Sure.

I. Corcoran: For weeks! We got done with our party, but we took it. And nobody said anything. There was a jonquil lying on each of the napkins, and not knowing any different, I said, "Oh, how lovely. To have daffodils to celebrate this". And Sister Mary Angelita said, "They are jonquils". And I said, "Oh, that shows how I'm a country person who is very ignorant about the spring flowers". And that was that. I think that was about the extent of the conversation for the evening. But anyway, it was thoughtful and nice.

J. Moran: It was meant to be nice.

I. Corcoran: And the next year, I think it was... it could have been that year, but I think it was next year... at Easter time. Now, this was _____... Sister Mary Angelita said, "I didn't want to spoil the enjoyment we were having and the work we were doing, but I must tell you now that I have to give up". She said, "I have a very advanced stage of cancer and my time is extremely limited. I will be leaving for..." this town in the northern

part of Iowa, I think... "where my doctor is". And, ah, Sister Mary Disticia and I have... I think it must have been the second or third year, because Holy _____ and Marietta Cross had come expecting to take over the newspaper and the magazine. And Angelita had sent for me during our holy week retreat and explained that she had to go. And she said, "Sister Mary Disticia and I feel that you should take over the creative writing and the _____... writing publications, the creative writing publications.

J. Moran: Of course.

I. Corcoran: And Sister Mary Madelena the newspaper. And the magazine, well, it got a little bigger when it had it, but it was... oh, it was the size of my dissertation, which is in that stuff. And, ah, it was substantial and good. She didn't want one thing in that magazine that would not have been good in the Atlantic Monthly or something else. And the girls would slave for months to...

J. Moran: To get the...

I. Corcoran: ...to get a thing good enough.

J. Moran: To polish it.

I. Corcoran: And, ah, I just... I just couldn't see... And, now, I was teaching. That first year I had taught three classes, that was at 2:30, in freshman English, was at least ten page papers apiece. And practically all of the upper division English. I

taught Shakespeare, Essay, Contemporary Drama, about which I had to learn everything I could overnight. I don't remember what all, but, practically all. Angelita was just too sick and we didn't know it. And, ah, when _____ and _____ came, we were relieved, the rest of us breathed a sigh of relief because they came, obviously, expecting to do the newspaper, the creative writing. And then to have, and I need to come out with this, I _____ And she says, "Sister Mary Magdalene will take the newspaper".

J. Moran: And you would do the writing...

I. Corcoran: And I would do the other things. And for twenty years I was the moderator of the review. The name was changed, it was _____ in the first place. It would have been nice to keep it. That was the name of the Greek water clock which regulated the Greek prose. Writers were allowed to talk just so long, and they stood beside the great water clock to speak. And when their time was up, they had to stop, whether they were finished or not.

J. Moran: Oh!

I. Corcoran: And that is used to account for the perfection of Greek prose.

J. Moran: So it was not wordy.

I. Corcoran: It was not wordy and every word counted.

J. Moran: That's remarkable, Irma.

I. Corcoran: That was... the first two years of Mundelein College. After the first year, and this shows the humanity, the dearness of Sister Mary Disticia, we had a big party taking off everything that had gone on during the year. And I had this style show. We had it in the Home Economics Department. There were two large sewing rooms, with a movable partition... we could open and close the partition between them. And, ah, we had it in there. We had a big horseshoe shaped table... we moved the tables to make a horseshoe, with Sister Mary Disticia at the head. Well, I took the dress display... the figure that they used in the... my name, my... my memory is really going... and that's why I'm trying to get this done before it's too gone.

J. Moran: Absolutely, yes.

I. Corcoran: And, ah, I attached, on the opposite casters, there were four on the thing, the dress form, long strings, we got a funny looking old nightgown that somebody had put new sleeves in because the old ones were completely worn out. you didn't get anything in the beginning? And, ah, a funny nightcap that _____ wore when she was working on her dissertation because it was so cold, and...

J. Moran: (Laughs) Fur-lined.

I. Corcoran: I forgot what I... also, I got, I think somebody's fuzzy bedroom slippers. And when that part of the show came up,

I pulled the alternating strings for the casters so that it turned and these... Oh yes, and a stocking over somebody's face, with the features tucked separate, ah... chalk. And I pulled the opposite strings, so that it turned from the arms, just the way the model did, and...

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

I. Corcoran: ...grad school, the son of the old Kentucky woman across the road from us was principal of the high school of _____ near us, and he was way beyond his period of history, he knew that _____ idea. Anyway, I had to run his library during the weeks. He had the finest library, in the room he had equipment. So, in the top of the their story I have housed theirs and mine and two others were the only non-little cottage houses from _____. And he had turned his room into a scholar's room. And because he was never there, except occasionally on weekends, he told his sister I was to have the run of his room at any time that he was not there. To come back to Sister Mary Josephine, I felt I had a _____ to say that it is a fact that she was really not an intelligent woman. She seemed to me mediocre, to put it kindly. And that was the way most of the... many of the students and my friends felt. But if we had to get teaching certificates,

you had to take those courses. My mother was so afraid that she and/or my father would die before my handicapped sister insisted on my getting a second certificate in college, which meant that I had to take all of the education courses along with the regular college courses, which I would not give up. I didn't see any point in being in college if that happened. And I had antagonized Sister Mary Josephine dreadfully. We had one brilliant English teacher. I think they must have had the system, or a similar system that we had later, on the... on the... _____ signed me off the ten percent of the highest grades in the entrance examinations for advanced composition classes in English. They were the grades, which means they were apparently the best. And this teacher also was a real scholar, she had had her Master's degree before she entered the college... the community. She was Sister Mary St. Theresa.

J. Moran: St. Theresa.

I. Corcoran: And she left the congregation, unfortunately, the year after Mundelein opened, I think it was. Because I had been professed only a year or so. She had nothing to do with my entering the congregation. In fact, a comment she made after I had entered, just in passing, and she had known me a year or two after I had entered, made me think that she was surprised that I wasn't sorry that I had entered. She said, "Sister, did you like

us so much you couldn't bear to leave us"? But there was a bit of irony in the way she said it. And by that time I was in one of Josephine's classes to get the certificate for which I had very little respect. And then I have seen other things, too. Some of the unfortunate personal ambition among teachers. And I still think that is sad, and I have seen a lot since I came to Marianne Hall, of sisters looking around and a little resentment of who got to walk in the procession that _____ or something of that sort. The feeling that that was a sign of extra _____ that they done, been allowed to participate in it. I have had one or two table mates who talked about that at practically every meeting.

J. Moran: And they were... they were hurt.

I. Corcoran: They were hurt.

J. Moran: They weren't included.

I. Corcoran: They were badly hurt. It was not to the point of mortal sin or anything like that, but it was far from the ideal of...

J. Moran: I just always thought they were friends of the deceased that were selected.

I. Corcoran: They were. But these sisters somehow felt that they had a right to be in that procession, that they were special friends or something.

J. Moran: Also. Sure. That's too bad.

I. Corcoran: And then...

J. Moran: Could we jump on to thinking a little bit about John Michael?

I. Corcoran: John Michael, I believe, was very bright and very elegant. She, I think, without meaning anything, she could be conspicuously _____. I think I antagonized her. She had taught in Kansas City, at our high school there, for two years. She taught English. This is the only reason I can think of for her disliking me and having it in for me when she was President, although she didn't do too much. She didn't do anybody, in fact. She had a bad knee. She kept right on going immediately to her room except during the day, she had to be in the President's office. But after supper, she went to her room. After breakfast, she went to her room and came down when she had to for class or her office. And I remembered finally that in the early days of the postulancy, Sister Mary Berina had asked her to write a sonnet for a... to ask someone to write a sonnet, or to volunteer to write a sonnet, I don't know what it was, about fall. I don't know what she wanted it for. And I don't know, but I suspect that John Michael was the one who wrote this sonnet and turned it in. She gave me to read it, she may have... she... and I know she's all _____ because they send everywhere. And the only time I missed a publication of the _____ was when someone

had said that nobody would think recent students got published and it made her so mad that she didn't turn in anything for the _____ from then on. And they were always turned in by the English teachers. And, ah, anyway, I found it was turned in. And Berina gave it to me to read to see what I thought of it. And I said it was be a perfectly regular sonnet, it obeys all the rules and it has every cliché that anybody ever used in a sonnet. And that was the end. Well then, I think it was two days later, she asked me if I would write a sonnet and it was the same subject as the... I don't remember what it was. And I wrote one. And I carefully avoided clichés, and, ah, I don't remember now what it was. But I... I wrote the best sonnet I could on whatever topic she wanted. And it was used. And, ah, it was from then on I noticed an antagonism on the part of Sister Mary John Michael and I couldn't understand because we about the same age and we were both English majors from _____. And yet she seemed antagonistic. She would not a Clark student, so I hadn't known her before. She was from Kansas City and I thought, well _____ kind of a Missourian. And, ah, she was never friendly towards me at all. And it didn't occur to me until long afterwards that I'll bet she's the one who wrote the first sonnet. And that she knew what I had said about it, not knowing that it was written by somebody in the class. Anyway, that's the only thing I could

think of, that she was never really friendly to me after that, through all our years of _____. But she was very bright, like the rest of us who had our B.A.'s when we entered, she was sent on for her Master's the first year. She was sent to Ann Arbor, which was next, I would say, to Columbia, just about, in fame and competence and North Central's ideas. And I didn't know it until years later, but somebody told me that she did not get her Master's that year for the simple reason that she refused to write a dissertation. And it could be that she thought... she wouldn't be tops in it or that they might not approve it if she wrote it. And I'm sure that she that she could have written a good one. She was bright. But they said she simply would not write the required paper.

J. Moran: Strange.

I. Corcoran: It was very strange. So, she went on and she, however, went on with the four of us. I suppose Columba wrote one, I don't know, it wouldn't have been difficult for her at all, she could have tossed it off. She was bright, she was clearly financial oriented, but she was good. She was a very good business woman, I think, and she was business manager of the college in no time after she came in. And she was one of the really good, efficient ones.

J. Moran: This is Columba?

I. Corcoran: Columba. I don't think she has any heart at all. I think she has nothing but a... a lump of iron, but she was nice to people, you know. She was... she didn't butter them up at all, but she was a decent member of society. And, ah...

J. Moran: She did her job.

I. Corcoran: And she did her job. And they probably, they may even have accepted work she had done before. She had been teaching in high school for four years. And, ah, I think she taught Accounting and those subjects, I don't know. But, ah, I know whatever she did, I think she probably did very well. And we were companions on long trips several times because she was from _____, population 200 and something, I believe, and I was Anamosa, and they weren't very far apart. And her father was a country doctor who... to whom driving was nothing. We'd go on the train to Anamosa and he would come down and pick us up. I remember his being there when we got back from mass one morning at 8:00, sitting on the porch swing, waiting for us to get there to start out for Elkwood. My mother cried because we were entitled to half of that day. But my mother... (chuckles) brought him in for breakfast and we didn't leave out of _____ until around nine, I think. And we had a good breakfast and she and Dr. _____ were talking like old friends by the time it was over. (Chuckles)

J. Moran: So you had a little time at home.

I. Corcoran: I had a little time. I had had my two days and, ah, we didn't get there until late on the day we went, you know, so that cut out that day. Well, anyhow, _____ that and there's about two members of the community during the first summer and the early years of Mundelein College.

J. Moran: Thank you, is that the...

I. Corcoran: I sure that Sister Mary John Michael taught well, whatever she taught. It was in education, she had taken the classes at Ann Arbor, and I know she was well prepared and that she was good at it, and she _____.

J. Moran: Sure. We can put a period, then, beside John Michael and Columba. Irma, what about Lagory? You may remember some things about...?

I. Corcoran: Oh, indeed! I don't remember when Lagory joined the faculty. She and Herita Clarks were like this after she came to Mundelein. I don't think they had known each other before. Herita was working on her doctorate at the time I remember her. And it was when she working for it at Notre Dame. And I can't... I don't remember what it was, but it was something in History. And I'm sure it was well done because Herita was a bright woman and she was... when she did something she did it well. And, ah, Lagory was, too. Lagory was... they were both vicious in their ways. Oh, yes.

J. Moran: (Chuckles)

I. Corcoran: And Herita hated me because I had written and by '45 I had my Ph.D. and she didn't, and the Superior would say, "See what Irma thinks about it", when she brought it in, because we had to bring anything that was for publication in to the Superior to look it over. And, ah, anyhow, at that time I had published more than anybody. I hadn't published anything important, at all. I look back now and then the Ph.D. dissertation could have been published here. I think it was a different kind of introduction, that even that probably would be for... I wouldn't think at that time, because it was about Milton and people aren't... in this age, people are interested in, if they're not Catholic, and many of them even as Catholic, athletics and money and cars. And, anyway, that is the... that is immaterial now. They were both very intelligent women. Lagory was very political, she was, I think, a sociology major. She went to _____ U. for doctorate. She was there part of the time that I was. She went a little bit after I started, so she was later getting it, not because she was any better. And, ah, the two of them were very close friends. They talked a kind of funny... they did it to be funny, there was no sense... it wasn't intended to be sentimental... baby talk at each other. And they lived at different ends of the corridor, on which I slept in the middle. And you'd hear this utterly false

baby talk going on from this end and this end. Lagory was down here and Herita down here, or maybe it was the other way around. Herita taught in 507. That was the classroom she wanted and that was what she taught in. I, at that time, had 506 for a publication's office. It was next door to 507. If there was any noise at all in 506 she raised _____. And she was not above coming in and storming at anybody who happened to be in 506. Even, she'd leave her class and go and yell. And her class would hear what she was saying to them, you know. It was ridiculous. And the whole school was laughing about it. And one day while I was away because I was sent away doing research for grants for... Did you ever see my Thomas _____

J. Moran: Irma, one of my favorite teachers in high school was Sister Mary Leola, and I'm wondering about your memories of her at Mundelein.

I. Corcoran: Sister Mary Leola was one of the gifted women in, I think, the whole history of Mundelein. This shows the impression she made on people. I often, nearly always, I was called, if it may have to be from class, to take visitors who were writers or authors, in fact practically any visitors, through the college. And the brother of one of our sisters, _____ Gertrude, was the head of the Neumann Club at the University of Chicago. And when famous people came to lecture or to perform there, he sent them to Mundelein. So we had many distinguished visitors. And I used

to be sent to take them around. I suppose Sister Mary Disticia thought I had the gift of gab or something and I had a doctorate from a great university, which impressed people. And one time when I had taken the Irish players around, as I did every time they came to Chicago, one young actor who was utterly delightful, I forget his name now, but I remembered it for many years. After I had introduced him to Sister Mary Leola in the Children's Theater on the eighth floor, and he got out of hearing from there, he said, "What is that woman doing in a convent? She could have gone anywhere on the stage"!

J. Moran: She had a beautiful voice.

I. Corcoran: She had a beautiful voice, beautiful, big, dark eyes that responded to everything...

J. Moran: Yes.

I. Corcoran: ...she thought about. And she knew anything that an outsider could know about theater, I think. She was well learned in what she was doing. She was good. She would take a girl who you thought would never be anything but a clod and make an actress of her.

J. Moran: She had a talent.

I. Corcoran: She was very, very good. She came, or would be working on her big play of the year when I was working on my big, final magazine of the year, and we would meet head on because we had a

good many double majors, people who were doubling their majors doing two, both theater and writing. And we had the same people moving on things on which the reputations of both of us and our departments _____.

J. Moran: Irma, I... Your memory of these people has been remarkable.

I am very grateful for every minute of your time telling me these stories.

I. Corcoran: Those people you couldn't forget!

J. Moran: Evidently not. I thank you sincerely for this time. And I'm sure the committee will be most grateful for the all of your memories.

I. Corcoran: Well, I....

J. Moran: God bless you. Thank you.

I. Corcoran: I thank you for listening. It's been a joy.

J. Moran: Oh, it's really lovely. Thank you very much.

I. Corcoran: Thank you.

Transcribed by Patricia Kazimir
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