

The Generation Gap



Our Voices, Our Story

2025

Cover page: Horse drawn caravan made by Mary McInerney

Introduction

The Generation Gap brings together a series of stories that capture moments from different generations. Each piece stands on its own, offering a glimpse into how people remember their lives, their routines, and the world they grew up in

Rather than drawing conclusions or making comparisons, this book simply places these stories alongside one another. In doing so, it allows you, the reader, to notice differences, similarities, and contrasts for themselves – in language, experience, and perspective.

Taken together, these voices offer a quiet picture of how generations can live very different lives, even when separated by only a short span of time.

Each piece adds its own voice and point of view, and we are very grateful for the openness with which they were shared.

A big thank you to all who contributed and shared their stories.

Offaly Traveller Movement
Ballycommon Telework & Training Centre



Education



Biddy (69)

We walked to school in a group. When we got there the nuns would bring us into the cloakroom, wash us and give us clothes. It did not matter if we were clean already they would still wash us. The clothes were very old and very long on us! They put safety pins in the skirts to hold them up. Then they would bring us into the classroom. We were always put to the back of the class. I was put in a corner by myself with a tin box of crayons. We were allowed to come and go as we pleased.

CassieLee (18)

When I was in school I was brought to school by my parents. I would go to my line in the yard and then when the bell rang at the teacher would collect us and bring us to our class. Every child was treated the same and if you needed extra help the school would set it up for you. So we were taught like every other child in the school. We never really missed school because they would keep track of missing days and send it to you at the end of the year.

Mary Rose (60)

I would walk to school with my family. But when I got married and had my children, I would drive them to school because there was too much danger out there.

I had a good experience in school. Other than one or two nuns who were not nice to me. I left school at a very young age because my brother died. There was nobody to enforce children staying in school.

**Amber (16)**

In my school we had nice teachers and we got lunches in the school. There was a playroom and we went on school trips. We also got books, pencils and copies. It is important to go to school for our education and learning.

Chantelle (26)

I absolutely loved being in the Mercy Primary School. And when I was in that school, it was absolutely like, I was treated the same as everyone else. There was no difference with the communities and stuff like that.

And I absolutely loved it. It was, I went to that school too, but it was all right in my day.

Religion

Winnie (66)

A few years ago, I got stage four cancer. I had it in my lymph nodes. I remember that at that time, I was living in another estate. There was a neighbour who was giving us a very hard time. He'd be calling us names and spitting on us! He was a nasty piece of work.

My daughter brought me to the doctor, and they did all the tests on me. It was then that I found out I had cancer. Straight away, I was started on treatment. If you look around my house, you can see I have a very strong faith. Before I ever got sick, I had a strong faith, and I prayed so much. The doctor said that there was a miracle around me. I said the Rosary, I went everywhere, to holy wells and got holy oils. People everywhere were praying for me. To me, I believe it in my heart that it was through the power of prayer that I was healed.



Winnie Hanlon

First Holy Communion



Mary McDonagh

Winnie (66)

I made my First Holy Communion in the Monastery in Roscrea. I still remember it to this day. I think I was about nine years old. I remember I wore a little brown and cream dress with a cream cardigan over it. It wasn't a Communion dress. I had little white socks and black shoes. And I wore a little cream bonnet. We had our dinner in the Monastery too. Then we went for a walk around the woods with our parents and the priests. It was lovely.

I also made my Confirmation there with my older brother. I wore another cream dress, white socks up to my knees, and black shoes. I wore a rainbow-coloured jacket over my dress and a white veil on my head.

Marriage

Maureen (79)

There would be people in different trailers. Some related and some not related. The boy would say to his father I like her and I'd like to marry her. You might not know him from Adam. That lad and his daddy would come up and talk to your daddy. Now they didn't talk to you. Maureen, "I met Ned in Ballina when I was working. I didn't go out with him or anything. My father had a fair idea but I didn't tell him or my mother. One day I went to the shop with my cousin and on our way back we were laughing and blackarding. She said, "What about if Ned McCarthy asked for you?" My father said to me, "Ned McCarthy asked for you." I said I didn't know what I wanted to do. My father said, "well it's up to you." All the McCarthy's were outside the door with their ears cocked to hear what I would say. All the men were shouting in, "Say yeah! Say yeah!" My mother didn't really want me to go. I was her help. The kids were all like steps of the stairs; the youngest was only ten months old when I got married. In the end I waited about a half hour and said yes. We then went to the cinema that night with his brother-in-law and his son in the car with us. That was the rule years ago. You didn't go anywhere alone.

We had to wait three months to get permission from the Pope. We got married in a church in Ballina. We had an open-air wedding. There were no such things as a hotel or the like. People didn't have the money. All the tables were set up with white tablecloths and chairs. The cake went lopsided with the heat! It was the middle of June, and remember the good weather that time! It was a packed wedding. I got some presents! There was no such thing as invitations; people just came. Sure, they were drinking for a fortnight! My father paid for everything. My dress was bought in Ballina for £25. Things were so much simpler back then.



Maureen and her Dad

John Joe (22)

I knew Margaretta from social media and seeing each other at family gatherings. We only would say hello. I talked to her father and asked for permission to get to know her. We could then talk on the phone. If we wanted to go on a date her sister would be with us. That started the whole process of getting married.

We had to put things back for a while as it was the time of COVID – 19. These days there are still no invites sent out for weddings. When we got married in the 2021 the wedding took place in Roscommon church, and there was a marquee at Margaretta's family home after. Most people were invited through phone calls or on social media. Some people went to the church only and not the reception and some came to the reception and didn't go to the church.



Chantelle (26)

I got engaged and we got married here in Birr.

We had our reception in the County Arms Hotel.
the staff were lovely.

It was an absolutely amazing day and we had about 150 people came to be with us.

I had a beautiful big dress and we hired a carriage. It looked like a Cinderella wedding.

I had an amazing day,





Living on the Road & Travelling



Maureen (79)

Life was very hard, I was working from the age of thirteen in a factory with Germans. It was a German factory. I was getting seventeen pounds a week. I had to work Monday to Saturday. That was in Ballina, Mayo. That's where my mother came from. One side of mine was settled and the other side were Traveller. My mother never travelled, my father's mother did. I seen my grandmother but I never seen my grandfather. I seen my mother's father but I never seen her mother. She died at forty-four, her father went back to the army, and she dropped dead on the stairs.

We never went visiting when we were younger. We had to stay and do our own thing. My mother and father went touring and we children had to stay with our grandmother, my father's mother.

You were never let to sit by the fire to listen to what the adults were saying. We were told to get up and go down the road and play. "Small ears bring big stories out!" If a child came in carrying stories, they weren't listened to. They were sent out to play."

**Sarah (61)**

When you are on the side of the road and you are in a trailer and you have a few children. You know the saying "it takes a village to raise a child" well that was the village. The village raised the children. It didn't matter who owned the children, it made no odds, all the children were treated the same.

If Maureen had ten children and they came down to me, I'd feed her ten the same way I'd feed my own. I might never know Maureen but if her children came down to my place and I had dinner ready then her children got feed the same as my children.



Mary (66)

When I was a small child, my parents lived, used to go from camp to camp. They had a horse-drawn caravan and they'd go from camp to camp. There could be several camps in the one week.

You could be moved, you're moved from one place to the other, even as it is now, you're not allowed to live in them. But that time, they still wouldn't move because you were outside farmer's houses around and parked in on the side of the road. Well, they didn't want you moved.

They didn't want you there either. So, we had to keep moving from place to place.

It was very, very hard times. Sometimes you mightn't have a horse-drawn caravan. You'd only have a canvas tent.

A tent on the ground. And in the wintertime, in the wintertime it was very hard because the floods of water, from the water running under you, you'd have a straw underneath you. But next you'd find the water, that the water would be running under you, you'd have to lift yourself up out of that.

Winnie (66)

I remember back to when I was eleven. I spent six weeks in the hospital with a fever. We were camping in Roscrea at the time. We were in caravans; they were horse-drawn caravans. It was very cold in the winter. It was very hard for us. We had to wash ourselves outside in the cold winter weather.

In the summer, we loved it, and we travelled from town to town. We slept in tents during the summer. We would have straw underneath us and blankets and quilts over us.

I enjoyed travelling life and I enjoyed travelling from town to town and meeting all the travelling people. It was hard in the winter, but we loved it.

Mikey (22)

I lived in a trailer and travelled from town to town for about seven years. We were then given a house by the local authority. There was eight of us living in a little Sprite caravan. It was getting hard for my parents and we didn't have much money. We were happy to live in a house.

I am a proud Traveller man, but living in the housing estate helped me socialise better with country people.

If we wanted to play with other children, the boys would be out chatting while keeping an eye on them. The mothers and grandmother would be outside doing the cooking. They would making the griddlebread on the open fire. When we moved to the house my parents we still watching us when we went outside to play.

**Rachel (18)**

There are six girls and one boy in my family. I am a twin. My parents lived in a site in Birr when I was born. It was all my mother's family that lived there. We lived in a trailer, but we added two rooms to the hut, so we don't have a trailer anymore.

When we went out to play, we were watched from the windows. It was different living there because it was all family.



Work

Mary (66)

My father was a tin smith, he used to make many pots, kettles and buckets. He did all that for the farmers, and the farmers would give him food in return. We'd get fresh vegetables and eggs and a bit of flour. Sometimes we would get a bit of salty bacon.



We did go hawking and taking out to country when we were younger, I did do it. Yeah, I used to hawk the panini car and we'd go off out to the country. We'd go to the farmers.

My father used to make buckets, Lord have mercy on them. And he'd bring them on, you know, and swap them for food from the farmers. So that's what we used to do.

I actually liked doing it. I wasn't harming anybody or anything like that. I was only trying to feed my family, my sisters and brothers, my younger sisters and brothers.

Farmers and people did respect us. We'd go into a house, maybe with two buckets. Maybe father would make the buckets or maybe sometimes he'd make these big crocks.

We'd have them all up in the car, pony and car. And he used to make them and we'd go out to country and we'd swap them maybe for, food for like maybe carrots, spuds, bacon, tea, sugar, whatever. We'd come back home and we'd have enough to feed us for a week.

But they were very good to us now. I will say, when we went through the country, begging, they did think highly of us. You know, you might get another one to say no. But they were very good. But like, you know, you were coming from highly skilled people..

My father used to make copper buckets. He'd make them for people. And then he'd make, the farmers would be looking for troughs.

And my father used to make, he used to make the mugs for his drinking, the saucepans we'd call them. The tin saucepans. My father used to make them..

And then my brother Michael, then he took over.. He took over then.

And even up to this day, I think he still does it. And he's 77 years of age.



Entertainment



Mary (66)

The children weren't allowed to listen in on adult conversations. You'd be put away, sent off to play. Adult conversation is adult conversation. If a child heard something, they could pass it on to the next person, and so on. They might have misheard it. So they were never allowed listen in on a conversation.

The children would go play hide-and-seek. They would get an old can and kick it for a ball around the place.

The adults would go around the campfire. They would be singing or telling jokes. Have conversations with one another or tell stories. That was filling the night for them



Winnie (66)

We'd have our own tents. We'd build children's tents, we called them. And we'd all play together with the children.

And we'd have our own dolls and whatever. My mother would always make us rag dolls and all that. And she stuffed them for us. So we used to play with the dolls.

And then the boys of my family, they'd play Skittles. They used to have Skittles. They'd cut them out of sticks. And the dog would play a game of that, play a game of cards. They'd go hunting.

We'd play hopscotch. We'd play all that, skipping ropes and things like that.

That's what we used to do and we'd be in the camp with other families. But that's how we'd all get together and play.

And we'd play these games. The older ones of them would play the cards. And the youngest of them, they'd play the Skittles.

It'd be a game in which they'd put 12 Skittles on the road and you'd have to try and knock six of the Skittles before you'd be a winner. I remember it, yeah. That's what we used to do.

Communication

Winnie (66)

A traveller could always try and go and try and meet up with another traveller to contact with one another. And back that time, if anyone passed away by that time, you'd have to send them a telegram.

You'd have to go to a guard he'd write down what you'd be telling them and he'd have a note there and a telegram to call.

It was passed down to the next guard to try and contact you. To try and see who to contact you to tell you about the person passing on. Because you wouldn't know.

There was no phones or anything. Maybe you might see them for a couple of years maybe. And these people would pass away and you wouldn't know. So the only way they had of telling you is to try and get a telegram to you. So you'd send it to where you thought they were last.

You'd go to your nearest guard maybe. Yeah. And you'd explain to the guard, can you pass this down to the next town? To the guard.

And they'd go up and see if they could find this person and let them know that this such and such is dying. Yes. This is how you'd know.

This is how you'd find out about it

Food



Biddy Kavanagh and her famous cake bread

To make the cake bread, you put the flour into the basin.

If I were making three or four small cakes, I would use a whole packet of flour and add salt.

Shake it up really well and then add the buttermilk. You keep adding the milk until it is wet enough.

Then you have to knead it thoroughly by hand. Turn it out onto the counter and divide it into how many cakes you are going to bake.

You put a bit of flour on top and leave it to settle for 10 to 15 minutes. Just throw a towel over it and let that rest for a bit, then add it to a container. When its put in the oven I just keep an eye on it.

I take it out and turn it over on my hand and check for the hollow sound. If you don't get the hollow sound put it back into the oven for another few minutes.

When it is baked I wrap it in a damp tea towel for it to soften the crust.

Mary (66)

I always loved baking bread. I still bake it now. It's nice, but it never comes out like it used to. It is not as good as it used to be on the outside fire, because you would have a griddle at that time. It was my grandmother who taught me how to make it.

My grandmother would cook a big pot of porridge in the morning. She would never make it with water; she always made it with milk. Oh, it was lovely! At that time, it was put in old tin mugs. That was all you got for the day.

Winnie (66)

My mother used to always bake, we never had, there was never any such thing as takeaways or anything like that.

My mother baked her griddle bread, her brown bread, pancakes, pasta, stews and bacon and cabbage and we had it. We had our dinner every day. It's the good stuff.

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