Interview with Alice Ahern, by Leslie Frank, the Gravetending Project, the Center for Oral History, University of Connecticut, November 25, 1997

Frank: What I would like to begin with today is... would you tell me a little about yourself and your background. When you were born, where you were born, a little bit about your family life.

Ahern: Well, I was born in New York City in 1918. I have one brother three years older than I and two brothers younger, one three years younger and the next one two years so it was five between the youngest and myself. We lived in a suburban, at that time--its incorporated into the city now of course. But we lived in a one-family house. We had just gone into that house when the stock market crashed and everything fell apart in a big time way, but fortunately my dad's job was such that he could see us through. We all four went to private schools for high school, parochial schools were private [unk] And then my oldest brother went to Cornell. I graduated two years later and I wanted to go to Tufts. My mother thought she was getting her fill of Godless colleges. It turned out that I could go to Cornell because my brother was there and he would presumably keep an eye on me, things would work out that way.

As it turned out my next brother also went to Cornell. My youngest brother was a real handful as a kid growing up. I think part of it was that he was the baby, and he didn't want to be the baby so he would go out of his way to do things that were beyond what any of the other ones had done. When he got into prep school, he was constantly compared with his two older brothers, you know. Well, John did this and Bill did that, and what's the matter with you. There really wasn't anything the matter with him except
that he wasn't going to follow in their footsteps. And so one fine day he ran way. He was due home late afternoon and he didn't come in and about seven o'clock in the evening my mother and father were debating what do we do now. And I went out and talked with the kids on the street to see who knew anything about where Bob had gone. And one neighbor boy said, "Alice, he's run away." And I said, "Well, how do you know?" "He told me he was going to." And I said, "Did he say where he was going?" And Joe said, "He told me he was going to Texas." I said, "Joe, would you come in with me while I tell my mother and father." And Joe came in and we told them and they were just aghast at this. Along about midnight the phone rang and it was my brother John from Cornell. He said, "I've got Bob here and I am going to keep him for a couple of days." So bang, everything fell apart and came together again.

Bob came home and announced he wanted to go to public high school and he wanted to take flying lessons. And my mother and father agreed and so he was enrolled in the public high school and I don't think he ever went into the classroom. He just did go, that was all. Flying lessons were out at Roosevelt Field on Long Island and I was old enough to drive so I was the chauffer for my fifteen year old brother, back and forth for flying lessons. He got his flying liscence when he was sixteen. He couldn't drive a car in New York--you had to be eighteen--but he could fly a plane. He enjoyed it. By that time we were getting into the beginnings of a wartime situation. We knew this was coming sooner or later. And when it came, Bill had been an ROTC student at Cornell and he went into service immediately. He was stationed out at Fort Sill in Kansas and John was too tall. He was six, six and three-quarters and they wouldn't take him. And he was crushed 'cause everybody was going in and here he was sitting home. So he went down to
Mexico and got a job working for a car part company that was connected with my father's company. He stayed down there, I think actually he stayed until the war was over. Bob got in immediately because he could fly a plane. After he had flown a plane where he buzzed the church on Sunday morning and he did several other odd things. He was no longer flying planes. He started off as a private again. He got up to corporal, he was in what was called signal air warning—which was ground to planes advice on what was around [unk]. So the three of them . . . I wanted to go into the WAGS but my parents drew the line completely. "No way, you're not going to do that." So I got into the Red Cross as a volunteer, working house at Staten Island, which then had been built as a children's hospital but never, never occupied by children, so that immediately became a base hospital where they would fly men in, wounded men, they went right into Halmilton Hospital. And that was my contribution to the war effort. I wanted when I finished college to be a social worker and again, this was not acceptable really. They didn't want me in there. My mother thought I should be a teacher and I had no desire whatsoever to be a teacher. I got a job with an advertising association and I stayed with them for seventeen years. When I left, I left to come up here—married in New York, then come here. Bob, the demon lived right next to us in Storrs and he was a track and field assistant coach at that time. When our government started getting people into educational projects, a peace corp kind of thing really and they wanted someone with track and field experience to work in African countries, so Robert volunteered. He got paid actually but he signed up and started off I think in South Africa. I think in a matter of a year, ten months, he was permitted to bring his family [unk] three children. They all went to Africa. My brother Bill was married and had five children, he lived in Cheshire, Connecticut. My brother John was married and lived in
Menlo Park, California and he had several children. I was the one who had stayed home with—my mother was a semi-invalid—I was on tap for that kind of thing. When I got married to Tom Ahern who was director of the student union at that time, everybody was in a great state of shock because forty-one years old you should be settled down and doing what you are doing and that's it, [unk] I got married. Bob, like [unk] right next to us. Farrel Road. As we grew up, Bob always got the short end of the stick as far as the rest of us were concerned. He was being allowed to do things that we were never allowed to do and the way it goes with kids. But when I came up here—actually it was through him that I had met Tom, and by that time we were all old enough to be reasonable about things and give one another credit for one thing or another. I preceeded... we were married in June and in September I had been having some kind of difficulty, I didn't know what is was and I wasn't having my periods and I felt miserable and I went to the doctor and told him I thought I had a tumor. And he said, "yes, it's the most common kind. It takes you nine months to get rid of it." And well, wild excitement. My family took it pretty calmly because they had sixteen grandchildren at that point. Tom had two sisters and their were no grandchildren. So, here was an Ahern grandchild coming along. Well the day after he told me that I was going to get rid of it, I felt worse. And I was really in a lot of pain. It was a Thursday, the doctor's day off. And my sister-in-law was an RN, and so she called one of the doctors in Willimantic for me to go down. So I went down and he examined me and he said, "ride up to the hospital. We'll have to take a look and see what this is." So here I was with—I didn't know any of these doctors—but one doctor came in to examine me and he said, "Mrs. Ahern, have you ever been pregnant before?" And I looked at him and I said, "I was only married in June. And he said, "yes, but have you been pregnant before?"
And I said, "no, of course not." And then I thought what a stupid doctor, I don't want him having anything to do with me, get him away. At any rate, along about ten o'clock they decided that they would do a little operation and see what was causing the pain. And sure enough I did have a tumor, but it was on the outside wall of the uterus. And the fetus survived the whole bit and it was mad celebration. And so Jean was born the following March. They... the... in the meantime my father and mother had taken a trip to Hawaii. They had stopped at my brother John's on the way out and had spent a few days there. Then went to Hawaii and Dad got very sick there, was hospitalized for a week. Then the thing was to get him home again. So Bob was elected to fly to Hawaii to bring them home. And I in the meantime had had the operation. Well, we got my dad home but it turned out that he was hospitalized again and then he, at home. It went on and they didn't seem to know what it was. They thought he had a lung tumor and they operated on him and he didn't. And so this was the first year really of my marriage and a baby and my father in this condition and me going down to New York to check on things and to get food in--absolutely crazy year. Crazy, but in this period I think Bob and I were getting much closer to one another because if there was anything that had to be done quickly or whatever it would be between us. If you do it, okay or I'll do it. That kind of thing. Well my father died shortly after Jean's first birthday and [unk]. My brother was director of the Catholic cemetery of Hartford and they had just planned or built or whatever you call it when you do a cemetery, Bill had done it. And so my dad was the first one to be buried there [unk]. And at that time the arrangement was that my mother would also be [unk] there when she died. In the meantime, my mother came up to live with us. The house we were [unk], we added on to our house so she had a little apartment and Bob was a
regular drop in visitor. Periodically, he would take her for a day or two days, whatever so that I would have some relief from that. And so we played this game for eight years. My mother died and was buried [unk]. A year after she died, my oldest brother was diagnosed with multiple myeloma cancer and when my dad had died and we had consented to an autopsy and that was what his diagnosis was, so Bill was following right along in his bed and he lived for three years with it. He was really a saint. He took everything as it came. He was allowed to manage his own disease. He said when he wanted medication and when he didn't need medication, whatnot. And I would go down to Cheshire about once a week and spend the day with him. And this again was running back and forth constantly. Well, Bill finally went with [unk] multiple myeloma and Bob and Eilene had had their African trip and they were back home and things were kind of settled there and Bob at that point was track and field coach at the university and was the only one who ever got anything beyond a bachelor's degree, he got his masters. Which was a great accomplishment when you look back on what it had been like. But, Bob called me one night and says, "I just want you to know that I am going into the hospital, it's nothing serious but I want you to be aware that Eilene is going to be here alone." That kind of thing. That was fine, except that he had prostate cancer. So they operated on him but they knew right from the beginning that they had not been able to control all the thing. So he lasted for two years and during that time, we had moved about a quarter a mile away and I was in and out constantly, I'd make stuff that I knew he liked to eat and I'd stay with him while Eilene did shopping or banking or whatever she had to do. Whenever she needed me, she called. I'd say, "yes, okay, fine." And I'd be there. And Bob and I had great long talks in those days. He had quit going to church, this was in a period of changes in, from
the Latin mass to the language of the country and so on. And he didn't go for it at all, so while he was in, completely in control, at the beginning of his cancer, we would have really great philosophical discussions you know. And I would read things to him that I had enjoyed or whatever and one of the things that I read to him one day was a poem called "The Hound of Heaven." It was written I guess in the late 1800s by an English author and the theme of this is that God's love follows us no matter what we do or what we try to do, He is always there. And I read it to Bob, and there is a certain rhythm to it, that "he came following, following after. I fled [unk] the night and down the days, and down the ways of my own soul and always afterwards. The feet were following, following, following." And so I finished it and I said, "what do you think?" And he said, "is it death?" And I said, "no, it's not death, it's God's love." "Well, read it again." And you know this is long. [unk] But I read it to him again and when it got finished, he said, "would you put it on a tape for me?" So I put it on a tape and he would quite regularly play it. And then it got to the point where I said to him one day, "would you like to have holy communion?" And he thought for a minute or two and he said, "yes." So I asked the priest over at Saint Mary's if I could bring communion. And he said, "yes, you certainly can." So after that, Sunday morning I would go to church and then bring Bob communion. And then we got so we were praying the rosary. I don't know whether you are familiar with it at all but once around the beads are five decats but a whole rosary is three times around, fifteen decats. And so it was late in October, we were doing, we were going to say the rosary and he said, "the whole thing." And I said, "you mean the whole fifteen decats?" He said, "yes, if you wouldn't mind." He had gone off—at that time he was going in and out of consciousness, not a great deal but it did happen and it happened that day and so I sat there and finished the
beads and he seemed to reacted a little bit and we talked a little bit more. And he said, "you know what we were praying for, don't you?" And I said, "yeah, I know Bob." And he said, "it won't be long." So that was mid-October I think. My birthday is the twenty-sixth of October and he had said to his daughter that day, the day before "I am not going to spoil sis' birthday." Well my mother's birthday was the twenty-ninth of October, the evening of the twenty-eighth his daughter said to him, "tomorrow is your mother's birthday, why don't you run home to her." And by God, he did. Shortly after midnight, that was it. And he was buried. He's buried up on the hill there. And his calling hours down at Potter's were Halloween night and the place was jammed. All of these kids who had been his students and whatnot were all there and the funeral mass was on Saturday morning. It was homecoming weekend and here we are up on the hill and the band is marching down below. Everybody. It was a funny situation because nobody was in tears. We all felt, thank God it is over and he is at rest. There is no more that he has to go through. So he is buried up there on the hill and my sister-in-law really keeps the flowers blooming as much as possible but she gets away as much as she can too. And she is likely to be gone for a month, two months, whatever and the day after he was buried I went out there and I put out crocus bulbs. In the sod and it was really fabulous because they came through in Spring and here are all these crocuses blooming all over the place. But she makes an effort to keep flowers there and I take over when she is away, make sure that they are watered, weed a little bit, that kind of thing and then at Christmas time I always get a big wreath with a bright red bow which stands against the stone. The stone that he has is odd-looking, it is like a bench actually. It is black granite and it has a sailboat on it because that was his great love, his sailboat—which he kept down in Groton. And it has been eleven years, this
past October it was eleven years that he's been dead. To me it's, it just seems like yesterday really, I have no consciousness of the passing of time [unk]. And at one point, I thought "well look [unk] around here and check on things here, what are you doing about your other brother who is down in Cheshire?" But he was, as I said a director of cemeteries of Hartford diocese, and I think he [unk] my mother and father both prayed. My third brother died of cancer a year ago, June and that was in California but that is beyond my problems. They have to do their own work there. But it was funny, just the other day I thought, "gee, maybe you should send a wreath for John too." And so they all three would have their Christmas wreaths on. Bob's kids are very good about sending flowers for his birthday and the anniversary and that kind of thing so it is not very much that I do really except for weeding and watering. I haven't planted anything more. I thought of it several times but I haven't done it. And that is about all I can tell you about i.

LF: Okay. Why don't I ask you some questions about some other stuff?

AA: Okay.

LF: Let's clarify first, really quickly, whose graves you are taking care of. Your brother Bob.

AA: Bob, the youngest.

LF: The youngest.

AA: The demon.

LF: The demon. Right. And that is the primary grave that you are taking care of. And that grave . . .

AA: Is right up here on the hill.

LF: Up on the hill. Can you just briefly describe the cemetery and his location in it for people who won't have visited this particular place.
AA: Yeah, it's on the hill right next, well, between the dormitories [unk]. The Jungle?

LF: Yeah, the Jungle dormitories.

AA: The synagogue is up on the other side actually and Bob's grave is about three-quarters of the way up the road on the left hand side. And it is black granite stone with a sailboat on it. And then there is a marker at the foot of the grave with his Army signal air warning battalion and the dates of WWII. I don't think there are any other black stones up there. There are three that are kind of set together. Bob's is the first one and the one next to his is by coincidence was a girl, woman who died two years before Bob I guess but she was in the bridge group. You know it seems so strange that Emily was right there and we all said, "well, they got a pair, all they need is two more and they are all set." But the next grave up is a [unk] pink granite [unk]--really startling. It's around where the kids are training for track. Bob used to have them run up the road of the cemetery. Up and around and down. It was part of their routine tracing day. So many of them said that it was just the right place for him and that they would always feel that coach was still there you know. Which was kind of nice to tell me. And kind of comforting to think that other people that other people would remember and would look for him, his grave. I think that [cough] well, there really is only one daughter left that is in this territory. She lives down in Groton, Norpoint. And the other kids are scattered--Vermont, South Carolina, and California--but they regularly come to visit and when they come a visit to the grave is always there. And I think it is one of the few that are really kept flowering through the summer season from Easter on, it pretty much has got live plants [unk]. I think it would be very easy to find it, just going up the road and looking to the left. It kind of,
it's maybe three plots back but there isn't very much in front of it. You can pull your car off the road right there and walk over to the stone.

LF: Was Bob's the first grave you were tending or did you do any, did you and your family perhaps take care of graves when you were growing up?

AA: No, the only. That is another [unk] I was thinking about as I've been thinking about this. My father's mother was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in New York. His sister was buried there and one aunt. And he always went at Christmastime to put wreaths on their graves. My mother's family were all buried out in Long Island and she would go maybe twice a year. She would go out but not do anything, just go and look at it and come home again. [unk] my brother Bill who was the director of cemeteries always called the Long Island graves a "marble orchard." He didn't see any reason why anybody should go there to look at that. [unk] old things [unk] that was I think the first one that he planned from scratch and his idea was that there would be no headstones, everything was flat. And then there were little shrines along the roadway there would be a little shrine. You know the Alps kind of thing with a figure, a statue in it. And then there were several large, larger than life size statues that were at intervals around it. But the impression that you get is just park-like really. And they don't, they permit what they call blankets in the wintertime. You can put down stuff that will last, mostly imitation flowers which Bill would pick up personally and destroy if he knew it. But then in the growing season it is mowed, it's just like a lawn. And it is planted with ornamental shrubs—it's quite attractive really.

LF: Did Bill see the cemetery he designed as a public space?

AA: His idea in doing this was to have this be a kind of a park. That you could go and just sit. And you could let the kids run around because there wasn't anything that they could run into or knock over at that so much. I don't think
it's caught on very much. People have so many other places that they can go, they don't have to go, but if you do want to go it's a pleasant place and it's nice to look at the shrubs, that kind of thing. Then out in Saint Benedict's cemetery which is out in West Hartford I think, all of the new sections are done [unk] It's flat and you have your headstone flat in the ground. And then there is a calabarium there which I believe is the first one that was built in a Catholic cemetery. And the impression that you get on that is more of a chapel, there are stained glass windows in it. It doesn't, well [cough] in New Orleans they have done this. Years back they did it because the ground was so low that they were burying people above ground. They would have concrete box kind of thing, above the ground. Then the burial was there and then the calabarium buildings were built so that their walls were like drawers and the casket was put in there. This is very common in Europe. But I think Saint Benedict's is the first one in a Catholic cemetery at least. [unk] It was his idea and his design, fortunately they went along with it and it turned out well. Everybody was happy [unk] But other, but in my growing up years we were not at all conscious of our parents going to visit cemeteries you know. We just, it was taken for granted that Dad would go the Sunday before Christmas. He would go up to Woodlawn and put the wreath on the graves there. But no great visiting of graves or that kind of things.

LF: Did your father go alone?

AA: Yes, he did.

LF: So you knew he was going [she laughs] but you had no idea what he did when he got there. [both laugh] How would you describe Bill's career? Was he a cemetery designer? Was that just an aspect of his career?

AA: Yes, it was actually. He graduated from Cornell from the Ag College. His main interest was labor relations. And this was the period where some of the
agricultural workers were beginning to form unions so you got more than two cents a head when you picked lettuce, that kind of thing. And he was all for them. The cemetery thing came because one of the bishops in Hartford was also interested in labor relations and wanted someone on [unk] "Let's get this plan together and Bill, you go to the meetings because you can do it as a layman." You know, just the same as anybody else. Whereas if a priest or a bishop went, everybody would say "oh wow, they are into this now." whatnot. So the cemetery was kind of a sideline if you could call it that. But he was very interested in it and the year that he died, there is an association of directors of Catholic cemeteries, I don't know if it's all, I think it is mainly Catholic cemeteries [cough], but he was named cemeterian of the year which we thought was calosoly funny. How far can you get into this business!? [cough] But he was very proud of the work that he did and he really enjoyed the planning. He made one trip where he learned, I guess Italy was where he concentrated on carvings or figures that could be used in a cemetery and the ones that he selected were used in All Saints' Cemetery. And he had chosen them, it was months before [unk] But he liked to show it off actually. It was so much better than the "marble orchard." [unk] When he died, they were telling the people from other parts of the country, cemeterians, directors, planners or whatever, there many priests and lots of laymen people and then along with it came all of these labor people who had known him through that. So it was a big deal really. I think that the church in Cheshire was just being built at that time. They had a very large auditorium in the school and so the mass was in the auditorium. The mass was said by the Catholic bishop and it was concelebrated with the Episcopalian bishop of Hartford and I guess the elder rabbi of New Haven--these people were all on the altar and it was again kind of weird when you sat there. How has he managed to bring
these people together, they are all here for his celebration. I think about twenty years ago, a girlfriend of Jean's was being married up on Cape Cod and Jean was the majorduomo. She had gone with mother and Beth to select the dress and the bridesmaids' dresses—her two sisters were the bridesmaids. And Jean had everything figured out how it should go and whatnot

Tape One, Side Two

LF: You were saying that Jean's friend was going to be married by a
AA: The Episcopalian bishop of Hartford was the chief celebrant at the wedding and we came. He came, he had a summer place on the Cape and so he was there for several days before the actual wedding date. There was a get-together where Jean and the bishop were there. And Jean said, "I know you, you were a friend of my uncle Bill." And he kind of looked at her and he said, "Bill Kennedy." She said, "Yes." And he just thought that was the greatest thing in the world, here it was and Jean said, "I remember I thought it was such a funny name that you had, Morgan Portius." And she still to this day if you say anything about an Episcopalian, this will be it—Morgan Portius was his name. It was interesting that she should meet him that way. It was a happy occasion, he was so happy she was there and well and Bill's niece. She was the youngest of the grandchildren. [unk] So she was [unk] She also on several occasions when she has been down for a day or night or whatever, will go up and just look. I don't—you don't question their prayerlife anymore. [unk] So I don't think she goes up there to pray but she does go up just to look and "that's Bob." Which is kind of a nice feeling for her and for the rest of us—his wife and the kids all appreciate the fact that she is with them in this so it's a very comforting thing actually. I—looking back on the way people used to go to cemeteries, some people would go, if their husband died, they would spend the next three years every Sunday to look at a grave--a
ridiculous kind of thing. But we have gotten very far away from that and yet there is something that still stays in your mind and stays in your heart. You can go up there and remember happy things and think the person is at rest, for them it is all happiness.

LF: Can you talk a little bit more about that?

AA: Sure

LF: How do you see death and the afterlife and how it relates to visiting the cemetery?

AA: Well, of course we know perfectly well that what's going into the ground there is going to be all eaten up and gone. So we have to figure how about this. What kind of regeneration is this going to be when we are all in an afterlife? You can argue yourself crazy thinking about it because you're suddenly thinking 'how many people have there been in this world before me--and are we all going to be together someplace--and how am I going to be able to find the people I want to be with?' And with that I think so much about the Mormons theory of bonding. That you find out as much as you can about the people who have gone before you in your family and you are bonded with those people [cough] in the Mormon faith. For us, I don't know. It is hard to say. You believe in a hereafter. I always say, "I hope in hereafter." Because I think it would be a hell of a gip if there wasn't for all the years that you didn't do things you wanted to do because that's the thing to do. And you did to a certain extent well, I would like to get to Heaven, the alternative, going to Hell--I personally doubt that there is anybody in Hell except the devil himself. It's like you know, you think about God's mercy and you think about all of the real really basic things that are taught and when you go to the cemetery, I think there is a certain feeling of 'this one has made it.' And you're--I'm never sad when I go to Bob's grave because I think so
much of the suffering and the fact that—as a matter of fact, all three of my brothers really had bad times. They all kept the faith, they all took this not—never did anyone of them say, "why does this happen to me? Why should I have to bear this?" They all three said, "well, this is the way it is." With my brother John it was lung cancer, and I hadn't seen him for eight years before he died. But we used to talk to one another quite regularly on the phone and again when I went out for his funeral mass which was on one day and then he was buried eighty-five miles up the coast in California, so that we went up the second day for that and again, no one shed a tear. It was—I don't think anybody said, "God's will." I think the whole this was for him, he's at peace and let's be glad that he is and pick up and go on from there. I think that there is a great deal of that feeling when you do go to visit the cemetery. I think I—twenty or more years ago—we went to Europe and Joan of Arc had always been my pet saint. Jean was named for Joan of Arc actually and when we went to Rouen, there is a mark in the marketplace where Joan was burned at the stake. And I had the feeling there that there was no cemetery for her, no grave but there was this mark representing the fact that she had been burned at the stake in this spot. And then you wondered now really did they mark that spot so carefully that they know that this is it? And actually, reading about Joan I think they did. They marked it very well, right from the beginning—that was where she had died and you'd get the same feeling that this represents something that has gone ahead of us and maybe some day we will catch up with her if that is the way it goes. Last June we went to a Elderhostel program on opera and I never new there had been an opera written about Joan of Arc and we saw this opera on film and it was strange feeling to see these people playing their parts and then in this last scene Joan is just lifted up with a long trail after her. And you see her go up, her whole
person when you know that there wasn't anything left when she was buried. They do say that her heart was not burned, but nobody ever saved it. It was found in the rubble of the ashes and that was that. So I think you do, in spite of the fact that you know that the flesh corrupts and bones are eaten and so forth, a thing we used to say when we were kids about the worms crawling in, the worms crawl out. You accept this but at the same time, you have this feeling of a whole body being taken into another universe or whatever, it would take an awful lot of space--unless we were a lot smaller.

LF:  Three inches. . . what about when you visit a cemetery? You sort of talked about this but not very explicitly in your conversation here--about the relationship to that space and the memory of the person you are there--do you feel that that person is somehow connected to that space or . . .

AA:  Yeah, I think you do. Which really doesn't make a great deal of sense when you realize that the flesh corrupts but some how or other--yes, there is something of them that is still there and if you will have a conversation with that person, that's the place to go. It sounds crazy but you can. You can go into a cemetery and have a strong enough feeling that that person is still there and you can give it problems--this is what is going on with me, what do you think I should do--and at the same time feel you're above there so maybe you can help me. And the, the, one of the classes--1956 I think it was--and Bob was coaching at that time, one of the men in that class of 1956 is a doctor of sports medicine up in Canada [unk] At any rate, I never knew about this until just this past year that he had arranged to each year have a mass said for the athletes and the coaches and the phys ed teachers that had died since that class of '56. And I went to the mass this year. My sister-in-law had said something about it and I got the feeling that she was having a mass said just for Bob and I thought the least we could do was to go to mass. So we went
and then we got into this situation where this wasn't it at all, it was this group, but when the mass was over they all trouped up to Bob's grave and had little things to say or things to remember him by. And Eddie Enos, the doctor Eddie Enos was the one who had arranged the whole thing and he said, "well, I just hope that Bob has got his foot in the door and he is going to hold it open for the rest of us. He's got it made and he is going to see that the rest of us get in." Some people would think he was a little bit wacky really but there is that much feeling that you are connected with someone on another plane but still can help you.

LF: Would it be okay if we turned back a little bit more to some of the more tangible practices of gravetending? I want to ask you to maybe talk about some of the typical things--I realize that there might not be a typical thing--but some of the more standard aspects for you or themes of things that you do often. And if you go with people or you go by yourself? Tangible aspects.

AA: I go by myself. I was one girl with three brothers so I was pretty much alone from very early years. I did what I did by myself. Then when all three brothers were married and away from us, I was the one who was there, the only one who was there. So this is the way that I go. I go up and I never mention this to my husband because I am sure he would think I was absolutely out of my mind. "What are you doing!?!"

LF: Is there any gravetending in his family?

AA: No, none at all. None at all. As a matter of fact, I never even knew where his family was buried until one of his cousins [?] died and we went to the funeral service and then we went out to the cemetery. And along the conversation was, "oh yes, there is this one's grave and oh, there is that one." But no, nobody ever goes. They probably would think it was a little . . . weird but for me again, it is like something that you own and so you like to keep it as
perfect as it can be. It is like having a beautiful plant. And doing what you
can to keep it looking the way you want it to look. I know that I have gone
up in the summer time when we haven't had much rain and the place has
really turned almost brown you know. There is no overall pattern of
watering, so it is up to you as an individual. There are faucets there but you
bring your own pail and water your own grave. And I think that is part of it-
you want it to look as nice as you can. When Bob was buried, the morning
he was to be buried we went down to Potter's [unk] except it was closed and
you know everybody gets to have a wall of plants if they want to. Now that I
can't see--this leaves me cold, but this was the thing. And each of this four
kids put something in the casket. One of them was a package of cigarettes,
and I don't--the thing that I remember is that Paul, his son--he had three girls
and one boy--and Paul put a twelve pound shotput in there. And [laughs] if
it makes it more acceptable for you that's okay too. And the pack of
cigarettes went in his pocket so it would be real handy when he needed them.
I can't remember what the other two did but those stood out in my mind.
And most of all the shotput because I thought they are going to have a hard
enough time with that big casket anyway and then to add the shotput to it.
[unk] a little much. I didn't feel any inclination to put anything in to go for a
last [unk] because--a very old, important story about the minister who said,
"this is only the shell, the nut is gone." But this is the way I feel about it--this
is the shell that's left and okay, we take good care of it because its yours and
you have it looking as well as possible because its yours but beyond that I
don't go. When my brother John died, California is really weird, different.
Evidently they rarely have calling hours. The reason for it was there were so
many robberies of homes while the family was at the funeral parlor or the
mortuary or whatever and they don't put it in the paper. So you're dead,
you're dead, that's it. But my sister-in-law did say to me, "would you like to go down to see John before the funeral mass." And I said, "no. John and I said goodbye to one another about a week ago." We didn't know that he was going. It was an ordinary conversation. But "well, goodbye and we'll talk again." And I had no desire to see him and then the other thing, so many people make a fuss about the way the person is laid out, what the person is wearing, and so on. In my mind, you--as long as they got on something decent, you don't have to go any further than that. I mean you don't have to buy a new suit of clothes to be buried in and I know that it is done but I think that's absolutely ridiculous. [unk] You're dressing the shell.

LF: Do you have a sense that people will continue to care for the graves after
AA: After I'm gone?
LF: After you're gone. [laughs]
AA: Yeah, I am sure that Sherry, his oldest daughter who lives out Groton/Longpoint, I'm sure that she would. She has never really gotten over his death. They all were hit by it but Sherry more so than the others. The night that he was buried, the youngest daughter Jane walked out of the house--didn't say anything to anybody--just walked out of the house which was okay. She was doing what she wanted to do that was it but it got later and later and Jane didn't come home. About eleven o'clock Jane rang my doorbell and she was really in a bad way. She had been sitting up there in the cemetery talking to her father, you know. And I said, "Jane, you don't have to go up there to talk to him, you can talk to him here, anyplace you want to." There is no going there to do it. But I think that yeah, the daughter in South Carolina sends flowers and the people at the florists know exactly where the grave is and they have to take them up and put them at the grave. And I have to check on in and let Lori know that they are beautiful. We did have
snow that night but they were still there. For my own burial site, I would prefer to cremated

LF: Could we wait for this motor [on/off] the motor is off so we can talk about you expecting to be cremated. You don't have any great feelings about yourself.

AA: I don't. I just have the one daughter really. No grandchildren. I have always tried to keep her in a situation where she didn't feel that she had to take care of me. I did. I always felt that I had to take care of my mother.

LF: You mean in health and sickness as while you are alive.

AA: Right, and for Jean I would hope that if it were her decision she would have me cremated and I don't really care very much what she does with the ashes. I used to say I would like to buried as sea but you can't do that anymore. That to my mind would be the perfect way. To be gone with a twelve pound shotput to take you down. That kind of thing. But I would much prefer to let's forget about it, they've gone on to better things. The way I feel, I hope. You have to wait and see.

LF: But you don't necessarily see, or you don't necessarily hold the next generation up to the same standard that you hold yourself to?

AA: No, no. I don't. I don't. I think that these kids are living in an entirely different life. There are so many things that were compulsive when we were growing up and they no longer are. And there were some things in this generation that I feel very sad about but on the other hand there are lots of things that I think are great.

LF: Could you give some examples?

AA: Yeah, I just think it is wonderful that a woman can decide to have a career and be taken seriously about it. I think when we went to college, well you went—that was all. You didn't go with the idea, most of us didn't go with the
idea that I want to be an engineer. I know that there were people that did
and they had a pretty tough time for a long time afterwards but did
eventually get some satisfaction out of what they wanted to do. I think just
leaving home in my time, if you weren't married you didn't go and have your
own apartment and live your own life--keep the hours you want, that kind of
thing. I did, for a little while while I was working, sublet an apartment. That
was during the war years when it was kind of difficult [unk] whatnot. So I
was away from home for five or six months [unk]. And I thought, "boy, this
is great." You do what you please, if you don't feel like making your bed you
don't make it. And you would never do that at home. These kids do just
what they want to do and they don't make any apology for it. It's what I
want to do. My daughter has a [unk]. She graduated from Colorado State
University and she, her degree was in fine arts, theater and she had a
scholarship for Boston University. She went for one year and decided that
this was not what she wanted to do. And I thought, "oh, sorry Jean. All the
years that I was [unk] the ideal thing for me would have been to live in
Boston." And here she was and she said, "well, no more." Well, the next
thing she did was to get a job with a paper company--giftwrap and ribbons
and all this stuff--and this is what she has done since she graduated from
college. She's on her third paper company now. But she travels and she got
married three years ago and "well, so long Mark, I will see you in a week or
two." And I think why in the name of God did they get married, you know--
really. But they don't think anything of it.

LF: So you admire the flexibility of it?

AA: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. And no guilt feeling about this.
LF: Those are some of the positives, I want to ask you about a specific negative about the graves--do you ever have any problems with vandalism? Anything like that?

AA: No, no.

LF: No. Okay. I guess that's one of the negatives of this day and age that you miss out on.

AA: No. I, I . . . I don't think in my recollection of the graves in our family or the graves that I know about, I don't think that there has been any vandalism. And I suppose that you should be horrified by this but I don't think I am really. You would wonder why anybody would want to vandalize a grave and I suppose some people [unk] are buried in their jewelry or something like that, though you know they weren't. So I, I don't know, I think when you bring it to graves, yes I can see where it does have a certain sadness to it as well being a kind of fiendish thing to do but again, comparing these times and times gone by--when I think back on some of the things we did when we were in college, if these kids did it they would be in jail. You know, a very cold winter night, it was a great thing to go down to college town and throw eggs against the plate glass windows because it would freeze on there and we didn't think of this as being vandalism, just "oh boy, let's go." And if you did it now, it would be criminal. So I think many of things change so much with the times. I think in times gone by, vandalism would have been a horrible thing. Now I think what do they get out of it really.

LF: Is that a change in you or a change in the times?

AA: I think it is a change in the times, really. I do.

LF: I also wanted to return to the idea that you said that you initially planted crocuses. Have you done any planting or has your role been mostly keeping . . .
AA: Keeping things going really but I, I. Several times I have tried getting thyme growing but I haven't been successful. But I haven't yet given up because that kind of fascinates me because it would be low enough so that when they mowed it wouldn't hurt the thyme. It would still be there. And it would be kind of fascinating to have it.

LF: Right. Since you share responsibility for this grave with your sister-in-law and her children, what is your relationship with them? Do you sort of defer to them, do you not really communicate about taking care of the grave?

AA: We don't talk about it very much, no. I think we just [pause], I think we have a tacit understanding that you do this and I'll do that. I'm sure if I wanted to say I would like to put a rosebush there, they'd say, "yah, go ahead that would be great." But I always have the feeling that they have the primary responsibility or duty or whatever you want to call it and I'm the accessory. If you can't do it I will. And I am sure, if it were a matter of it not being taken care of for a long period of time--I'm sure they would say, "would you do it." And I would. I would accept it the same as we did when mom was sick, you know. Two months before he died, my sister-in-law was just so beaten down. She called me one day and she said her sister and her sister's husband were taking a trip up for some kind of conference in Maine and they asked me to go. And Sherry will stay in the house, her daughter, would you stand by?" And I said, "sure." So Sherry and I took over for the couple of days that she was gone. I think this is the way it would be--that if for any reason you can't do it, I would be glad to do it for you. Eileen would go for a long period then all of a sudden she would kind of break down. She did one night and we were sitting in the living room talking. And I looked down and all of a sudden here was a little garter snake coming across right in front of
where we were. And I said very calmly, "Eileen, don't move quickly but there is a little snake coming across the floor." And she went right [laughs]

LF: Jumped to the ceiling, huh.

AA: And she's got the door open and she had a broom and she [unk]. I don't know what she was trying to do, get it out, but I mean. But when it was over she said to me, "Please don't tell Bob." And I said, "well, I wouldn't think of it." Well, two days later Bob looked at me and he said, "why didn't you tell me about the snake?" [laughs] I said, "gosh, she never could keep her mouth shut." She had to go and tell him. But it had come. . . they had a woodpile kind of thing from the outside deck, they pushed the wood in this door by the fireplace. The poor little creature come through there and I'm the one who was really scared of snakes. I would say it was almost as though we were all one family. That we. . . no question of aunt or uncle, or husband and [unk]--we were all in this together. And I think this has continued on through taking care of the graves. I never really have had any great compulsion to do this with my father and mother because Bill was there and after Bill died there wasn't that much you could to really except a Christmas wreath maybe that would be there until time came to cut the grounds. But for Bob . . . I think part of this actually is that my sister-in-law gets a great deal of satisfaction out of seeing a plant flourishing besides it. So let's keep this flourishing so she can enjoy it. [laughs] I think that is probably true of alot of people. It is the small things you do. And again, it is a way of remembering a person, keeping them more alive in your mind.

LF: How often would you say you go out to the grave?

AA: Oh, I'd say summertime maybe every ten days or two weeks. Not so often in the winter once the ground is frozen and whatnot. Maybe once a month. Maybe more often if something occurs that is a reminder of Bob or things that
he had done or whatever. Then I go up and I park the car. And maybe just sit and look. There isn't much you can do in the winter except for the wreaths. But that's ... I think with the kids there is a very definite feeling that we have to keep remembering birthdays and we have to keep remembering anniversaries and we have to keep. ... I don't really feel that way. I feel that we're doing to keep it looking nice and to be able to know occasionally [unk] We call. Things that happen. [unk]

When he went to South Africa on that government job, he flew from Kennedy airport and Eileen and her four kids and my brother Bill with his five kids drove done. Tom and I were down to see him off. Well, his name was Kennedy. And we were in the VIP lounge waiting for take-off time and there was a bar [unk] and of course the kids were running all over the place. And suddenly one of these men came over and he said, "Mrs. Kennedy, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" [unk] "no." He started asking her questions. He asked if she was Mrs. Robert Kennedy. This was just about the time that Robert Kennedy was taking off. And we realized, the rest of us realised it and we are trying so hard to keep a straight face while this went on. And finally—and I don't know what he asked her—but she practically rose off her seat and said, "I'm a registered Republican. I don't have any relationship with those Kennedy's." But my Heaven, when she got to Heathrow airport the next morning, the word had hit Heathrow and there was a limosine waiting to take her to her next plane that was going to Italy and she got this treatment all down the line because everybody was convinced that this was really Mrs. Kennedy traveling with four of her kids, you know. And the rest of them [unk]. The lounge waiting for her. But you think of things like that and you just have the feeling that you know that it is
good to go up there and sit and remember that and think how funny it was and how much we enjoyed it. There were, it was one of those times. . .

LF: The tape just ended, do you mind if I put in another one?

AA: No.

Tape Two, Side One

AA: My brother, my California brother, John F. Kennedy, which made it even worse you know. And it was . . . there were [unk] very amusing [unk] and all of the Kennedy's would say, "we're Republicans, we have nothing to do with that." We thought it was kind of funny.

LF: Uh.

AA: Yeah, go ahead.

LF: I was going to ask you what kind of relationship do you think--I mean, this is going to sound pretty weird--but you're mentioning politics right now. And you mentioned growing up Catholic. Growing up and being able to live in a single family home. Would you say any you know sort of category--whether it is economics or religion or politics or anything--informed your gravetending. Or is sort of related more than another, or do you not segregate things that way?

AA: I would say growing up the way we did does for me make me feel the way I do about the grave-tending in that in our own home, we were brought up. We didn't have great gardens but we did have little gardens and we had grass that had to be mowed and that kind of thing. And that was a duty, to keep that looking as nice as you could. And to put in new plants or whatever has to be done. Yeah, I think that does have a bearing on it really. That was the way you were brought up, to take care of anything that was yours. I think my mother always said, "you want to get the best that you can and then
you want to take care of it.″ And that goes over to a lot of other parts of your life that you didn’t think about at the time. But that was being fed into your mind so later on you would follow along those principles of keeping everything as well as you could. I can remember growing up in New York where the trash was picked up three times a week. And most people didn’t put their trash out until after dark and it was picked up the first thing in the morning so you didn’t have cans and whatnot on the street and I can remember my mother being really horrified that those people had the trash out on Sunday. That was probably a mortal sin to have it on Sunday. But the funny part of it is that I feel, going back and forth to Willimantic and whatnot, when I see trash out there on Sunday I think, "obviously those people don’t care very much about what they are doing." And there is a certain amount of keeping it nice for other people. So that other people can look at it and say it’s clean, it’s neat. And if it’s possible, it’s beautiful.

LF: Can you think of anything else that relates to this issue of gravetending or taking care of the graves that I might not have come up with but that has been overlooked for you? [pause] We will probably have to wrap this up in the next ten minutes or so, because I have the feeling they are closing the building down. [both laugh]

AA: No. I really think you have pretty much covered it. I don’t think of anything else that makes me do it or makes me want to do it. There really is no compulsion in my mind, this is something that I enjoy doing. I think if I felt compelled to do it, I’d probably resent it. But I enjoy it so I do it.

LF: I also wanted, I think there is only not even a question. If you don’t mind, I think this will be a nice place to end. [some clarifying conversation about spelling, names, and the fact that she ended work to get married.]