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Between the Wars

A House on Church Lane

Rosemary and Mary Frances McNally

Rosemary and Mary Frances (Fran) McNally were interviewed twice at their home at 5800 Greene Street for the Between the Wars project, first by Louise Strawbridge on May 26, 1992, and then by Gregory Woods on August 17, 1992. These excerpts are from both interviews. It is not always clear from the tape which sister is speaking so we have put R/F unless we are sure of the speaker. The main speaker seems to be Rosemary. Fran died April 15, 1996 and Rosemary died on April 3, 1997, both at St. Joseph's Villa in Flourtown. Thanks to Lou Brownholtz for his extensive additional research.

R. My name is Rosemary McNally. I have no middle name—Mother said my name was incongruous enough! She didn't think the names went together too well. I was born at 733 E. Cheltenham Avenue in Germantown in 1898.

F I am Mary Frances McNally and I was born at 733 E. Cheltenham Avenue in 1901.

R/F. My mother's maiden name was Mary Frances Quigg. She was born at 217 Monroe Street in Queen Village in 1875. Her grandparents immigrated from Ireland so her parents were born in Philadelphia. Her father was a ship's chandler and that's why they lived near the waterfront. Chandlers supplied the sailors with equipment, such as a bowl for food, knife, fork, tumbler, bedding I imagine.

My father's name was Robert Joseph McNally. His parents came from Ireland in 1859. He was born on Washington Lane at Cherokee in 1863. He went into the plumbing and heating business, with an office in Germantown and one in Chestnut Hill. Uncle John ran the Chestnut Hill office. I found out that it was at 27th [Shawnee] and Highland Avenue on the northeast corner opposite the old firehouse. My father's office was at 5616–5618 Germantown Avenue right two doors below Cheltenham Avenue. It was a big double store.

Q. Did your mother work outside the home?

R. No. She was a musician, organ and piano, before [she married]. She played for the Visitation Church in Kensington. She was a very accomplished musician. And we always had a piano—a lovely Steinway. Our sister had a stroke and came to live with us for five years. We wanted her to feel at home here so we sold the piano so her furniture could be in that corner.

Mother kept busy keeping house, sewing. We always had a maid—she was Irish, live-in. We got them from an employment agency on E. Price Street, run by a



Rosemary McNally
c. 1928. Courtesy
Edith Phelan.

Black woman, Mrs. Rodvill.¹ Her son was one of our playmates. We never had Black help except for a laundress. Mother was a graduate of Mount St. Joseph Academy (as we were). She was in the class of 1894. She was a boarder. My parents met at a party. My father dabbled in amateur theatricals and they met through the Skelly brothers, who were more professional theatre men than my father. My father loved to act—he was a ham. We attended St. Vincent's and he was in the St. Vincent's theater group known as The Enterprise.

One time Mother took me to a play Dad was in. I was so small I stood on the seat. Dad had a very amorous scene and he kissed one of the cast and I called out, "Mother, why did Daddy kiss that lady?" It brought down



Rosemary and Fran's father, Robert J. McNally, acted with the Dramatic Club of the Enterprise Catholic Young Men's Association. Here he is seen in *The Banker's Daughter* in 1893, with two actresses who, as Mary Carr and Maude Gilbert, later had success in Hollywood. GHS archives.

¹ Martha Rodvill ran her employment agency for forty-two years, mostly at 31 E. Price Street. She provided African American and Irish workers as domestics, governesses, maids, cooks, and chauffeurs. For more on Martha Rodvill, see the *Germantown Crier*, vol. 48, no. 2, fall 1998, p. 60.

the house. Dad was furious because it threw him off cue.

Frances and I belonged to The Theatre Guild for many years—we loved the theater.

We went to St. Vincent de Paul Church.

Q. Do you remember that first house on E. Chelten Avenue? Is it still there?

R/F. I remember it well. We lived there till 1907. At some point it was moved down Chelten to the corner of McMahan and then it was torn down for a gas station. It was a nice house. It wasn't large but it was single and had a porch and high steps up to it. It had a parlor—it had a green carpet with big roses, cabbage roses. The furniture was very formal. There was a curio table and a sofa, really a settee—it was mahogany with inlay. The dining room was oak, that awful oak. I've always hated it. And the bureau in Mother's room upstairs (we still call it Mother's room) was the same bureau she had on Chelten Avenue.

Dad built that house. It had a stable and a nice garden in the back. Father's brother, Uncle Ed, and his family, lived next door to us. And my grandfather lived with Uncle Ed till he died.

R. We played with my three cousins next door. I remember Fran sitting on the top step of the porch with a bottle in her hand. Mother didn't wean her for a long time.

Q. Where did you go to school?

R/F. Immaculate Conception School on Chelten Avenue at Ardleigh Street. I walked to school by myself. Or Dad would walk with me. I walked home for lunch. The maid prepared it and we sat down to eat in the dining room with Mother.

Mother used to have at-home days. People would leave their calling cards. I can't remember her going out but I remember her having calling cards and friends coming for tea on certain afternoons. We found in Mother's keepsakes her wedding invitations and her little cards that said At Home. Of course, we did have a telephone but they weren't used so much in those days.

Q. I understand your family was in the Blue Book—the Social Register?

R/F. Oh, we're not Social Register, no.²

Q. Did your father have a car when you lived on Chelten Avenue?

R/F. No, he had a carriage and horse. There were horse cars at that time on Chelten Avenue—with straw on the bottom in winter time, according to Mother.

We moved here [5800 Greene Street] around 1908. The first Christmas we were here Dad was very frugal. He didn't believe in getting anything until he had the money to get the best thing he could. He was very careful.

Mother said the first Christmas we had an upright piano, which had been a wedding gift from Dad's parents to Mother and Dad on their wedding day. And we had a Christmas tree. The second Christmas we had a piano, a rug, and a Christmas tree. The third Christmas we had a piano, a rug and this desk, which was made in Germantown by a cabinet maker named Kyle. It's a lovely desk—an antique. We also got toys—puzzles, dolls. My mother's mother was a wonderful needlewoman and she always dressed dolls for us at Christmas.

One time we wanted a pony. We saved for it and we got to the magnificent sum of 2 dollars and 11 cents, but Dad led us to believe he was going to give us a pony for Christmas and he kept saying on Christmas morning, "Don't you hear the pony neighing?" So we finally went to the tree and we had bicycles that year. I was very disap-

A 1907 photograph of Robert McNally, who was a successful plumber. He did the plumbing for many large houses and businesses, including plumbing and heating the Cardeza home on Washington Lane, a water plant for the Coulter Inn, a steam plant for Staton Bros., and a hot water plant for Mrs. W. L. McLean on Queen Lane. GHS archives.



The McNally family moved into 5800 Greene Street around 1908. The photograph was published in a book of "handsome homes" and captioned Park View, as the house overlooked Vernon Park. GHS archives.

² In fact they are listed in the 1911 Blue Book, which says that as it "contains a selected list of householders from the most prominent streets, arranged in a convenient form for easy reference, we feel we have a pretty reliable list of well-known and well-to-do residents of Philadelphia and suburban towns" (1894 Blue Book information).

pointed. I think he loved horses and felt bad that we didn't have a pony but we had nowhere to keep him.

Besides plumbing and heating he also built houses. Do you know the Ashmead Place houses? There are about 60 of them. He built those with two partners, Henry W. Pletcher and Francis Boas. Then he built at the corner of Maplewood and Germantown Avenue. They owned most of the houses on Maplewood, which is now a little mall. Then Dad built a house on Wissahickon and Cliveden.

This house we are in was named Park View in a publication at the Germantown Historical Society because we overlook Vernon Park. City Council bought the [Wister] estate for \$300,000. in 1892 and called it Vernon Park. There were always activities in the park. Police would do exercises with their horses. There were plays and opera on large stages. The people who lived in the big houses nearby had governesses and nurses bring the children to the park. People used to gather on our porch on Memorial Day.

The person [James Matthews] who bought this property from John Wister built [it] to discourage the city of Philadelphia from cutting W. Price Street through to Greene Street.

My father didn't build this house but he renovated it. Once in a while we see something he thought of. We have wonderful closet space in this house. It's very well planned.

When we moved here the house next door [5736 Greene Street] was ramshackle. Then Dr. Robert Perry Cummins moved in and renovated it. He was on the staff of Germantown Hospital. His living quarters were on one side and his office on the other. He had a Model-T Ford. Frances and I would lie in bed and listen to him trying to crank that car on a cold winter night. He was a wonderful doctor. He came over here one night with his overcoat over his pajamas.

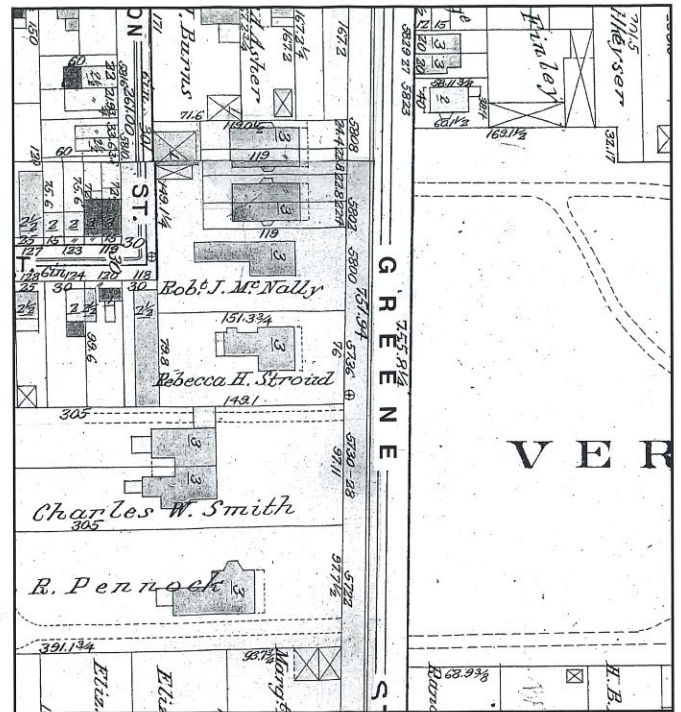
Q. What do you remember about your father's carriage?

R/F It had navy blue upholstery. It was drawn by one horse, called Bob. He went to Foley's³ just below the Deshler Morris House. There was a ring there and Dad used to go and exercise the horse in the ring.

His first car was a Buick—always a Buick.

Q. What did you do when you graduated from school?

R/F We had a reception in the rotunda at Mt. St. Joseph Academy.⁴ Our parents would be on the marble floor there and we would come down the bishop's stairway.



The 1911 Ward atlas shows the McNally house at 5800 Greene Street, overlooking Vernon Park. GHS archives.

BOTH PHONES

ROBERT J. McNALLY

Plumbing and Gas Fitting
Steam and Hot Water Heating

Filters of All Kinds Furnished, Cleaned and Repaired
Patentee and Manufacturer of


The McNally Duplex General House Filter
Special Agent for

The Pasteur Germ-Proof Drinking Water Filter
5616-18 Germantown Avenue, Germantown, Phila.

A 1917 ad for Robert J. McNally's business. GHS archives.

JOHN A. FOLEY

Manheim Riding Academy



5434
G'T'N. AVE.
Gtn. Phila. Pa.
**Huntingdon
Valley
Riding
School**
Abington, Pa.

A 1923 ad shows the Manheim Riding Academy, run by John A. Foley, near the Deshler-Morris House. GHS archives.

³ The Manheim Riding Academy, owned by John A. Foley, was at 5434 Germantown Avenue, behind the Deshler-Morris House.

⁴ Mt. St. Joseph Academy was founded in 1858. The building was taken over by Chestnut Hill College and the Academy moved to Flourtown.

We had an armful of flowers and wore Grecian gowns. They still have those Grecian gowns. The modern girls voted to use them. They have a sort of Juliet cap. We had probably punch in one of the parlors and then we stayed overnight and called it a feast. The Sisters provided us with sandwiches and punch and things like that. And then the next day we left. We went straight from the Mount to a party in Wilmington. It was lovely and there were boys. At the Mount we didn't have boys. You danced with the girls. But we had programs and put the girls' names as the boys.

R. One time I had a dress—it was my first evening dress and one of the nuns said, “Rosemary.” We had to be inspected before the party to see if our dresses were modest. My neckline they thought was too low. Sister said, “Rosemary, your neckline is too low and I'm going to put a little bit of “tully” [tulle]. The sisters were amazing but they were so good and they gave you a marvelous education.

Remember the Del-Mar on Chelten at Morris Street? They had tea dances and there were boys. We had dates. We went to dances at St. Francis Country House between Pelham Road and Carpenter. Penn Charter dances were held at the Cricket Club on Manheim Street. I went to the Germantown Academy plays with a boy. At school the girls who were boarders there had a chaperone in the parlor—boys could come and visit on Sunday afternoons.

Do you know the Musical Corridor at the Mount? There were practice rooms for musical instruments—harp, violin, piano etc.

We hoped one of us would inherit Mother's musical talent but we never did.

Mother had Sanctuary Society and we made vestments for the Mission and Mother and Roberta [sister] and Frances and I would go up on Tuesdays and sew and make these vestments.

Q. What courses did you take at Mount St. Joseph?

R. We took the classical course, with four years college prep. There was no Chestnut Hill College when we were there but Roberta [sister] was the class of '24 and that's the year the college began.

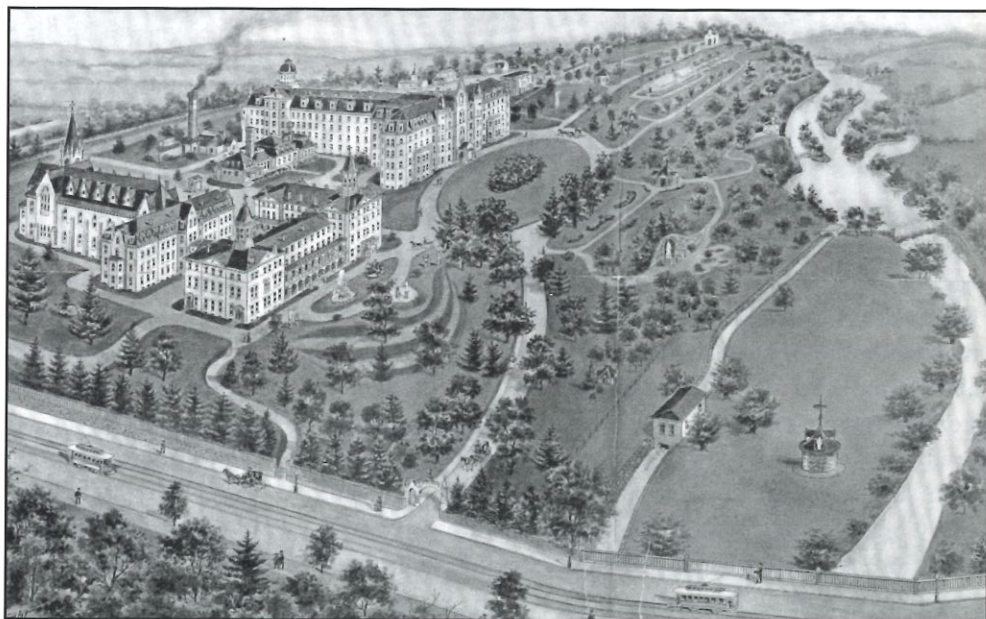
I graduated from high school in 1917 and went to a little business school here in Germantown, called Miss



Mary Frances (Fran) and Rosemary McNally c.1930s. Courtesy Edith Phelan.



Rosemary and Fran attended tea dances at the Del Mar apartment house (built 1903) at Chelten Avenue and Morris Street. GHS archives.



Rosemary and Fran McNally and, before them, their mother, attended Mount St. Joseph Academy in Chestnut Hill. GHS archives.



Both Rosemary and Fran attended Mary Dillon's business school after high school. *Beehive*, July 1925, GHS archives.

Dillon's and I learned stenography and typing. I wanted to go to college but Mother said that Dad felt he couldn't afford to send me away to college. There were hardly any colleges around here so I took this course and then went to Shady Hill Country Day School. I didn't teach per se at Shady Hill—I did teach, but I shouldn't have. I was the school secretary—had my own office and everything. The library was next door. I learned to accession books. Then whenever a teacher was out I taught. I remember I taught a fourth grade arithmetic class for half a term but I shouldn't have—I had no degree.

After Shady Hill I did various volunteer things—worked at the Sanctuary Society, at the Mount Alumnae Association,⁵ was on the Board of the Deshler-Morris house, and was active in the Dominican Retreat.

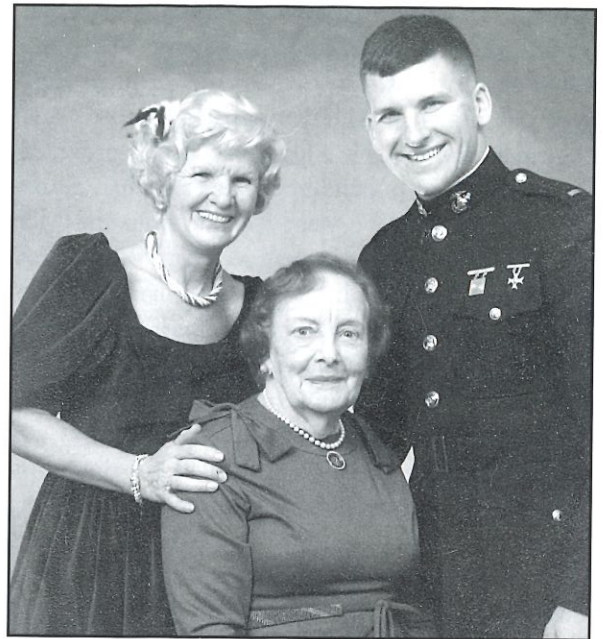
F I also went to Miss Dillon's and then I had jobs with brokerage houses mostly—in town. I went by train. I loved going in town.

R/F. And then the theater on Saturday afternoons—my whole crowd went and I loved it. And we belonged to a bridge club—we played Auction.

Q. Did you live at home?

R/F. Oh yes, we never even thought of having a separate place. I never wanted to. Roberta wanted to be home also. She was a laboratory technician at Germantown Hospital (she had taken her course at Chestnut Hill and then the pathologist there moved to Germantown Hospital and he took her with him. She married John O'Donnell from Chestnut Hill in 1946. After she was widowed she lived first at Germantown Manor, at Upsal and Greene, then she moved to the Hathaway House at Wissahickon and Cheltenham. And then she had a stroke and was in rehabilitation in Chestnut Hill and then she came to live with us. She was with us 5½ years.

Q. What sort of social life did you have between the wars?



Rosemary (center) with her nephew, James Phelan, and his mother Edith, at James's wedding, 1984. Courtesy Edith Phelan.

R/F. We went to plays. We played bridge or games, jigsaw puzzles, called our friends on the telephone. We went to movies and live shows. My father and Mr. Boas owned the mortgage on the Colonial Theatre and we were invited to sit in the box at the first Vaudeville show. Believe it or not, Charlie Chaplin was in one of the shows—he was very funny.

R. The boys used to call around dinner time and would ask would I go to a dance and I would have to go back to the dinner table and ask my parents if I could accept. My father would say, "Who is he? Who are his parents? What do the parents do?"

F. One time I had a date and went to a play at the Germantown Academy. It was a school night—that was a grand privilege. When I got home Mother and Rosemary were saying "Don't make any noise—we don't want your father to hear any noise"—because it was so late. My father didn't like the idea of going out with someone he didn't know and on a school night.

Q. Did you dress up for dinner?

R/F. No, no. We wore uniforms at school and we changed into plain clothes.

F. Rosemary wore a black Peter Thompson uniform. It's a sailor suit with a collar, a square collar in the back. It had a black silk tie and a white linen dickey with Navy insignia, anchors etc. Peter Thompson was a tailor on Walnut Street for the Navy. We all wore them. We didn't like them, but we wore them. They were serge. Yeah, and even our gym suit was serge, isn't that horrible? And great big bloomers.

⁵ Rosemary was president of the Alumnae from 1942–46.



Every week, the Pletcher store at Maplewood and Germantown Avenue, would call Mrs. Mary McNally and take her order for groceries and deliver them. 1903 photograph, GHS archives.

Q. Did your father rule the roost here? Did your mother have areas she was in charge of?

R/F. Dad didn't make any decisions for us, except where boys were concerned. I thought he was overly strict. He'd sit there in the front hall or on the front porch. He knew every stick and stone of Germantown because he'd been brought up here. He didn't intrude on our date—he went upstairs. We rebelled but not to him—we complained to mother.

Q. Did your mother get the food for the family?

R/F. Yes, and this is interesting. She very seldom went to market. She would go on Saturdays and order her own meat, see it cut and everything. But then she wouldn't carry anything home. It was put on a delivery truck. In between times, during the week, it was Pletcher's at the corner of Maplewood and Germantown Avenue—they would call and say, "Mrs. McNally, what do you need today?" And she would tell them or the maid would have told her what was needed. If the maid forgot something and Mother called them again, they came even if it was only a loaf of bread, they came with it with no problem at all. In the winter they brought the order in a sleigh. In the Depression Mr. Pletcher went out of business.

Q. Did you know any Black people?

R/F. Only in that house on the corner there—you can just see the side of it from here. They were named Burnley—the father was an Indian and the mother was Black. They had three or four boys and two girls. They used to come in the back gate and the Irish maid would feed them. Several times Mother sent the boys to summer camp [at the Wissahickon Boys Club]. I don't know what the father did. They needed money badly. I imagine he dug or did manual labor. The boys, George and Frank, went

into the Army in the first World War—it was a better living than they had ever known. The mother was very frail and had asthma—the ambulance would be there in the middle of the night taking her to the hospital. She had a heart condition and died young. Frank had bad asthma. They weren't strong children at all. We had a Black laundress and our cleaning lady was Black.

Q. Did your family have a strong sense of doing charitable work?

R/F. My father was interested in the Little Sisters of the Good Shepherd. They took delinquent girls that the courts had assigned them and gave them a home there on Chew Street. They are now up in Fox Chase and are called CORA Services. We make a donation in memory of our father every Christmas. The nuns go into court and represent the girls and have them assigned to a home.

Q. Is this house like it was when you were young?

R/F. There's been some changes in this room but the dining room is pretty much the same and the hall. That table is a French table and the lamp. That was given to Mother by a friend of hers who had to move from a lovely house in Chestnut Hill.



Fran (l.) and Rosemary with Cardinal Bevilacqua, 1990s. Courtesy Edith Phelan.

Acknowledgments

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