

**New England Jesuit  
Oral History Program**



**Fr. Joseph S. Scannell, S.J.  
Volume 3**

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ISBN 1-60067-000-8

Distribution:

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Interview with Fr. Joseph Scannell, S. J.  
by Fr. Paul C. Kenney, S. J.  
October 5, 2005

**PAUL KENNEY:** Good morning Joe.

**JOSEPH SCANNELL:** How do you do?

**PK:** Good, thank you. I would like to begin by asking you about your early home life.

**JS:** I was born in a section of Boston called Jamaica Plain. My parents immigrated from Ireland when they were seventeen years old, and met each other here. They got married and had my brother, who was two years older. He was born when they were nineteen, and I was born when they were twenty-one. So you can see, I grew up with very young parents.

**PK:** Yes, very much so.

**JS:** On the other hand, while my brother was two years older by the time he was four, I was two. By the time

he was six, I was four. So in a sense he was educating me just as much as my parents were. Because we were toddlers together, we used to play together all the time. He knew more about games, so I was learning everything from him. Eventually, when we got big enough to play outside of our backyard and got to know some of the other kids in the neighborhood, we would go out and play games like baseball with them. My brother was their age, so they all knew the games inside out, whereas, if the ball was hit to me, I, being still a late toddler, did not know where to throw it. So I rapidly picked up two nicknames from my brother's friends, namely Dope and Stupid.

PK: You had two nicknames.

JS: Now, they did not give me those names in any sense of anger, but just having fun. So I did not mind it, and they kept it up for a number of years.

PK: But you were quite close to your brother. What happened to him?

JS: He became a diocesan priest in Boston, and served in different parishes up until the day of his death. That day he was working in Weymouth, but he came up to Boston to the Carney Hospital to visit my father, who was due for surgery. On his way through the emergency room my brother dropped dead of a heart attack. He was fifty-one. That was a shock to me. Eleven months later my mother died of a heart attack, and two months after her, my father died of a heart attack. So in almost just a year's time, I had that triple shock that left me pretty depressed for about a year.

PK: You were quite close to your brother. When were your birthdays?

JS: The 25<sup>th</sup> of December.

PK: And his?

JS: July. Well, on Christmas Day we would both get a present from my parents. The tag on my gift would

say “Merry Christmas and Happy Birthday.” His would just have “Merry Christmas.” But in July he would get another present. So he got two gifts a year, and I got only one. After a number of years, in somewhat of a playful mood, I started to reflect that my parents are generous the rest of the year, so it must have been Santa Claus who made them tightwads at Christmas! So I resolved that when I got to heaven, I would look for Santa Claus, and give him a piece of my mind!

PK: How was the atmosphere of your home? Were they fairly lenient or strict?

JS: Both. You know, for instance, we had to keep our rooms spotless and well-organized. My folks were just as neat themselves. As we were growing up, we learned how to help them, in every way, with their house-keeping or with taking care of the grounds, like cutting the grass, or shoveling snow and so on. It was a pretty cheerful place to grow up.

PK: You had a chance to play sports, and meet some important sports people, I understand.

JS: Yes. We lived in a three-decker. My folks owned the house, but we had a tenant upstairs, and they had a daughter, a grown-up girl. Every time the Detroit Tigers came to Boston to play the Red Sox, one of their players used to date her. While waiting for her, he used to play catch with my brother and me. So I will try and test you fellows. His name was Charlie Gehringer. Does it ring a bell?

PK: Was he a Hall of Famer?

JS: He was second baseman for the Detroit Tigers, and became an all-time Hall of Famer. Yes.

PK: How about finances? You kept active, I understand, with paper routes.

JS: Yes, in grammar school and up through high school, until I entered the Jesuits, I had newspaper routes de-

livering the *Herald Traveler*. I do not know if either one of them is still publishing.

PK: The *Herald* is.

JS: Yes. Well, their evening paper was the *Traveler*. That was the division between the two, morning and evening. So that was a twice-a-day workout for me. I was up at five, and very quickly out on the route, and again after school. On Sundays, the papers were like they are today—big, heavy things. I could not lug them all at the same time. So I would do half my route, and then go to the local parish to the seven o'clock Mass, and then do the other half afterwards. But at that Mass I always made it a point to go down the right aisle to the third pew, sneak in there, and that way I was always right behind—what was his name now?

PK: He was important in the sports life of Boston?

JS: He was third baseman or shortstop, and general manager of the Boston Red Sox [Eddie Collins, 1933-47].

PK: Was there a place nearby that you could play baseball in?

JS: Well, I lived on Carolina Avenue, and right across the street was a huge baseball field. School teams played there, and some semi-professional teams as well. Home runs frequently enough would come through our parlor window. We were outside center field. If the fellows paid for the broken window, which they did a few times, we would return the ball; but my folks would keep it if they did not. I used to hope that the guys would not pay, so I would get the baseballs!

PK: I understand you had to move the piano out of the parlor.

JS: Yes, so it would not get scratched or damaged by the baseball.

PK: You used to use that piano a lot?

JS: Oh, yes, from the time I was very young. My brother started before me. After a number of years I had caught

up fairly close to him in skill, and in a number of concerts in the city, at different times the two of us used to play duets on two pianos.

PK: When you went to high school, did you continue piano?

JS: I continued piano, and started brass instruments, primarily the trumpet, but also the baritone, tuba, and French horn.

PK: When you came into the Society, were you able to continue music?

JS: After the early years, yes, but not during them. The superiors had organized our novitiate so they had us doing certain things all the day long.

PK: Did you later meet any fellow graduate important in music?

JS: Yes. The only one I remember was one I was friendly with. He was in my year, but not in my home room class. He played the piano in the school orchestra, in which I also played. I dare say you have all heard of him, because later he became conductor for the Boston Pops: Leonard Bernstein.

PK: Did you ever see him again?

JS: Well, in a humorous way I did. After I graduated from Boston Latin School, I entered the Jesuits. I was pretty young, seventeen. But Bernstein went on to Harvard, and got his bachelor's degree and a doctorate in music. Then he started going to Tanglewood in the summer time, learning how to conduct under Koussevitsky. I was in the same town of Lenox, where our Jesuits had a novitiate and juniorate at Shadowbrook. After lunch I used to put my trumpet under my arm, and walk over to Tanglewood—not too long a walk. The guards would just wave me in, and I would listen to the rehearsals nearly every day.

PK: Going back to Boston Latin, what was your experience?

**JS:** Very demanding. It was then, and I believe it still is, the number one high school in the country. You had to deal with things like this: when it was founded in 1635, it was designed to be a prep school for Harvard Divinity School. So it was serious right from its founding, with the fundamental subjects of Latin and Greek, and modern languages, math, and science. Over the years most of the faculty were Harvard graduates. But during my time the faculty was undergoing huge change — most of the faculty were B.C. graduates, who themselves had gone to Latin School. So there was always a friendly spirit, because it was, I would say, half Catholic and half non-Catholic. Over the years, a large percentage were Jewish students, and even in my time, it had a small number of Black students.

**PK:** How did you do in studies?

**JS:** When I was a senior, I learned for the first time, around mid-year, that the headmaster had a ranking of each member of my year, ranked 1 to 700. So I went to the headmaster and found out that I ranked a 125<sup>th</sup>. I had no idea how close the rankings were. But I decided to work harder the next semester to see if I could climb up. I did work harder, but even so, my grades in each subject probably only went up about three points. So instead of getting a 60 or 80, I got a 63 or 83. By the way, 50 was the passing grade there. But a lot of the tests were zero or perfection.

**PK:** I understand that your parish was Blessed Sacrament for the first year, then you moved to another.

**JS:** From my birth to the first year. Then my second year, the family moved to Jamaica Plain, to St. Thomas Aquinas.

**PK:** Can you describe any influences on your faith development and vocation?

**JS:** Well, of course, my folks were devout Catholics, so understandably, they brought my brother and me up

that way. In fact, to this day, when each of the three died, the one thing I saved was each one's rosary, because every year during May and October, we used to kneel down in the living room after dinner and say a rosary. To this day, I still say a rosary on each of their rosaries, every day of the year. Not just the month.

PK: How did you come to know the Society of Jesus—through your parents?

JS: No, because all my folks had was a high school education in Ireland. But in this country, they did not know any Jesuits, and neither did I. I had never met one before I entered it. Well, I guess I did. When I started to think about it, I went to my pastor at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish to ask him how you go about joining up. He told me he did not know. But one of his former altar boys had become a Jesuit, and was stationed at B.C. So he said I should call him and have a chat with him. So I did, and got an appointment to see him, went out, and found out he was the president of Boston College [Fr. Louis J. Gallagher, S.J.]. So anyhow, I had several meetings with him, and then eventually he arranged for me to meet three examiners, who would advise the provincial if I was a suitable candidate. They interviewed me, and the provincial told me to report to Shadowbrook on July 31. So I did, and that is when, apart from the interviewers, I met my first Jesuits.

PK: What was your experience of Shadowbrook?

JS: Well, I tell you, to put it humorously, it was like being in a prison.

PK: Indeed!

JS: Your life was so regulated. You had to get up at 5:00 AM, pray for an hour, go to Mass. This is daily, not once a week, but every day. Then you did some work, either washing up all the breakfast dishes or sweeping. You got different assignments every week.

Twenty-five entered at a time, so there were fifty of us novices. After that, two years in the juniorate, where we did advanced Greek and Latin, and modern languages. There were fifty there, too. So Shadowbrook was housing, besides the faculty, a hundred young Jesuits in training.

PK: How were you in the studies?

JS: Oh, I found them all pretty easy after Latin School, because I could do Greek and Latin. So it did not bother me that I had to translate Homer or any of the other Greek or Latin authors.

PK: How about the ancient Semitic languages? Did you explore those?

JS: Not during Shadowbrook, but after I came here to Weston for philosophy and theology.

PK: Which Semitic languages?

JS: I studied Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac, because I was hoping to teach sacred scripture. The superiors went along with the idea. Eventually, when I got to theology, I was even teaching it to the other theologians. I knew those languages pretty well, but I have forgotten most of them now, because I was preparing to go to Johns Hopkins, where I would work for a doctorate in Semitic languages. But when it came time at the end of three years of philosophy to go out to regency, superiors thought I should go and learn to be a good teacher, instead of going to graduate studies. "Let that wait 'til later." So they sent me out to teach. For two years I taught at Cranwell. Now it is a country club and a golf course. I used to cut all the grass every Saturday when it was a rolling estate owned by the prep school. Then my third year I was transferred to Boston College High School to teach.

PK: Did you have any other responsibilities at Cranwell, such as dorm prefect?

JS: Yes, nearly all of us did that, because we had no big

dormitories. They were all—you might call them mansions if a private family lived there, but as dormitories you probably did not have any more than about twenty or thirty kids in each building.

PK: You had access to radio to keep you in touch with the world?

JS: I did, and the faculty did, but the students did not. But I felt sorry for the kids, because they were as interested in sports and the Red Sox as I was. So whenever I left my room, like to go to lunch or class, I used to leave it unlocked. If any of the kids who had a free period wanted to, they could listen to the radio. My best customer, as best I can recall, was a youngster whose name is still Ted Kennedy.

PK: Of the famous Kennedys?

JS: Yes, the Massachusetts Senator.

PK: That must have been something.

JS: Yes. Well, let me throw in an interesting little story for you. While I was still at Cranwell, one day Ted Kennedy's parents came to visit, but he was out. So I invited them into my room to wait for him. While we were chatting, they told me why they were there. They wanted to see the school's treasurer to find out what the average allowance was for the students, so that they could make that the amount that they would give their son. Although they had plenty of money, they did not want him to have more spending money than any other student. So it was educational for me to meet parents concerned with bringing their own son up properly.

PK: How were your years studying theology?

JS: Oh, just like philosophy, and classical studies, and all the years before.

PK: You were ordained in 1950?

JS: At the end of third year theology we used to be ordained. During the fourth year, you still lived the same

way, but now instead of going to Mass every day, you said Mass. When I finished theology, I did not go directly to tertianship; I went to Fairfield to teach. That was not the usual pattern.

PK: Then you did tertianship at Pomfret?

JS: That was a lot like the novitiate all over again. We started off with a thirty-day retreat. It was all done in silence. It was like the novitiate, almost identical, for another year. So the idea of tertianship is that they figure over the course of the years you have learned a lot about God, but you have not learned how to love him enough. So that was why they had that final year of just spiritual training.

PK: What came next?

JS: Then your career started, whether graduate studies or high school teaching. So, when I got out of tertianship, I was sent to Holy Cross to teach English poetry. There was another Jesuit in that department, Gerard Mears. He was also starting a course in art history. But half way through my first semester he got sick, and could not teach. I was brave! Even though I had never had a course in art history in my life, I volunteered to cover his course, and tried to work hard, with no time for recreation, trying to get the course up while I was already teaching. Instead of getting better, he went and died [Dec. 12, 1961]. So, here I find myself, besides my two English classes, with an art history class for the rest of the year! So I went through that with a little less trouble than the previous semester.

PK: You were brave!

JS: During the summers I used to go down to Columbia University but live at Fordham. I took courses in art history at Columbia, which I enjoyed immensely. It was such a magnificent school and department! The professors were very friendly—they used to take me to

lunch a lot. So that little adventure I had gotten myself into started to develop. As the years went by, I found out that instead of one class in art history, I had two, and eventually three, and soon was not teaching English anymore. But I was the only art historian in what was not yet a department. There was one fellow who was teaching a studio course in painting and drawing. His courses started to grow, too, as mine did. So eventually, I was made a chairman, and I had to try and build up the department. So I did; I lured faculty members from other colleges, and young Jesuits without an appointment yet, I got them trained. They got their doctorates, then came to teach there. So the Department of Fine Arts grew into a big thing; it still is at Holy Cross.

PK: Your bravery paid off.

JS: In my final years there on the faculty, just in my own classes—in three classes, I used to have 420 students: in two courses, 150 each, and in the third, about 120. That was the case even though the school rule was no more than 30 students to a class. You know, there might be a lot in your department who were majors, but each class was only supposed to have a maximum of 30. But the auditorium could seat 150, so I moved my classes in there. Now, if the school rules said only 30 maximum but 35 wanted to join, I would not have found it hard to say no to five people. But how do you say no to more than 100 people? So I did not; I let them join.

PK: Correcting exams must have been hard.

JS: Yes, during the semester I might give three blue books. How long would it take you to correct 420 of them, when you were also teaching? So my program was simple: after class each day, hurry to my room and prep the next day's classes, whatever they were going to be, and then start correcting blue books until about

midnight. Then I would call the nurse in the student infirmary and arrange for her to call me at 2:00 AM. When she called, I would go back to correcting the blue books, until it was time to go say Mass. I would do that for eight days in a row. So, it was quite a workout, to go eight days in a row with only two hours of relaxation. But I survived, and did not get sick or anything.

PK: It seems you loved it.

JS: Oh, I did, yes!

PK: The first sabbatical that you took in 1974-75?

JS: I did not apply for it, but I was told I had one. Not a semester, as usually happened, but because I had been there twenty years, they gave me a whole year! What would an art historian do with a sabbatical year? I thought I would like to visit as many museums in the world as I could, and photograph their treasures. So I told that to the rector. He thought it was a good idea. Then I got into the finances. I said, "I do not know how much money I would need to go around the world." He asked, "What do you want?" So I said, "Supposing you allowed me \$10,000, but I did not spend it all? Then I would return what I had left over." So a few days later he said, "Take \$5,000. But if you need more, let me know, and I will get some more to you." So I did, but I did not even spend \$5,000, because I traveled with the American Association of Retired People. Have you ever heard of the AARP?

PK: Yes.

JS: All right. Their rates were real bargains! They also ran great tours! So I signed up for three of them. The first one took me across Europe and Asia. In most of the cities there were Jesuit residences for their various apostolates, like colleges and high schools. I would stay there, and they would not charge me, even for the room or for the meals. The AARP tour tickets were

real bargains, too. At the end of my three trips, I had not even spent \$5,000.

PK: That was separate from the slides you took?

JS: My first trip took me England, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy, across Russia to China, India, Japan, and back to this country by way of Hawaii. I visited most of the major museums. Before I left to go on that trip, I went to the director of the Worcester Art Museum, and told him what I was planning to do. I asked him if he would write a letter to his colleagues, assuring them that I was a teacher, and that, if they permitted me to photograph their treasures, I would make slides for my courses. But I would not be making multiple copies to sell. That turned out to be one of the smartest things I had ever done. They instantly said, "Oh course." They were delighted to let me do it. Some would go so far as to say, "Why don't you come here when we're closed? Then there won't be anyone in the way when you're taking your pictures." So I used to do that, too.

PK: They were very hospitable to you.

JS: But even with other visitors there, I was there early so there were never many then. Thus, if I, let us say, got to something like the Mona Lisa, I could back up and take it from a distance. Or, when I got up closer and saw the remarkable painting, say, of one cheek, and how the pink glow in it moved from a highlight in the center of the cheek out to almost pale white around the ears—it looked like a real cheek, instead of a painted one—I could go up and take a close shot as well.

PK: You had great freedom to photograph.

JS: I went through that in the Louvre and in countless other museums. When I got back and had them all developed, I had over 5,000 slides. So you can imagine how handy they were during all my classes, because all of them were slide lectures.

PK: They sound like splendid trips.

JS: I will throw in one amusing story. I said I stopped in Hawaii en route from Japan. One morning I was swimming in the ocean, and I heard a woman shouting, “Fr. Scannell, what are you doing in Hawaii?”

PK: No!

JS: I was dumbfounded! Tried to think: Who knows me in Hawaii? I have never been here before; I have never met any Hawaiians. It turned out to be a secretary from Holy Cross. She and her husband were reliving their honeymoon trip, which they had taken twenty-five years earlier. She recognized me in the water!

PK: Remarkable.

JS: When I got back to Worcester from that trip across Europe and Asia, I did my laundry and got ready for the second trip. I went down to Florida, and from there, traveling with the AARP again, I went down the Atlantic side of South America, and back up the Pacific side, doing the same thing I had done in Europe and Asia—visiting their historic museums, and learning so much about South America that I had never dreamt of or heard about! Like the beauty of Brazil, or the population changes going on down there, as in a country like Paraguay. I was amazed when I was walking along the main street of its capital, Asuncion, nearly every store had an Italian name. I did some investigating. Since World War I, most Italian immigration has gone not to the U.S.A., but to Paraguay.

PK: Oh, so it was an eye-opening tour.

JS: Oh yes.

PK: Then back to the United States?

JS: Yes, I had to do my laundry again! Then the final trip was all in this country, from Boston to California. So now I could visit all the major museums in this country, living the same lifestyle as I had on the other trips. When there were no Jesuit residences, local parishes

would let me stay there. I went from Boston to Worcester, Springfield, Pittsfield, Albany, Syracuse, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, all the way to California. When I got there, I did a trip northward up into Washington and Oregon, and then another trip down to Southern California. But again, the major part of the trip was visiting the museums and continuing the photography. So that used up most of the year. But I never felt under any pressure to hurry or anything like that.

PK: It sounds like a highlight of your life.

JS: Yes.

PK: I take it, as I listen to you, that since we were encouraged by Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises* to find God in all things, that for you, God appears very much in beauty—in art, music, sound, image. Is that true, and if so, can you speak about it?

JS: Yes, I always would fill with enthusiasm to be giving any courses in art history. I told you that I used to have two sections of art history with 150 each. Well, in the History of Western Art I used to cover from what we call ancient art, as in Egypt and Babylonia, then Greece and Rome, through the early Christian era to the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance up until modern Europe. But then I had another course with two sections. My third course each year would be either American, Asian or African Art. So, what is your question again?

PK: Finding God in beauty.

JS: Oh, all right, so I found exciting things in all of those areas. Never ran out of them. When I was through with the year's teaching, and starting to enjoy the summer vacation, I was thinking to myself, "Here I am, and my life is really drowning in art history, visual art, painting, but also, sculpture, and architecture." I recalled when I was growing up, my life was pretty

much devoted to music, and now here in my old age, I am doing just visual art. So, I realized I was no longer toiling to get up art history. I knew more about it than I could ever possibly cover in all my classes. I figured I ought to do something about music at Holy Cross, because there was none, even though they had a school band for their celebrations and football games, and possibly an orchestra. I decided to start a music department. So I talked it over the rector, who agreed to give it a start. So I was able to attract professors from wherever they were, and get other young Jesuits to start studying in music and get their degrees. Over the years we built up a music department, although it was not called that as yet. It was still part of the Art Department, but I was the chairman of both. But I let them run their own affairs in music, and eventually when they were big enough, I got a friendly divorce, and they had their own department. Then some years after that, I started another department, dramatics. Among their courses, eventually, they learned a lot of operatic music.

PK: You thus founded three departments.

JS: But the thing that I was tremendously fascinated with was ballet. I even used to go to most of the classes, because by this time the school had gone co-ed. A lot of the girls had had dancing and professional courses. So to watch them in their ballet classes, practicing and so on, was simply astounding and fascinating! All of those things kept me busy, as you can imagine.

PK: How has your health been?

JS: I used to be sick a lot when I was growing up. I got a bout with double pneumonia and other serious things. But I straightened out by the time I was a teenager, and it was pretty good until I had a heart attack when I was 60. But I got over that, and I am now 86, and I have not been troubled for the last 25 years. Some-

where in the last decade, I discovered that I was diabetic. I was surprised, because I had no symptoms, but my blood sugar was sky high. When I came here six years ago, my blood sugar was up in the 400's. Now it is down in the low 100's, which is so normal that now I do not have to take insulin shots anymore.

PK: Congratulations. As we conclude, Joe, is there anything that you would like to say?

JS: Well, I am ordained 55 years and a Jesuit since 1937. I think that is 68 years. I will be 86 this coming Christmas. So it has been a long life, but I have forgotten millions of small details. But they have been happy years. My busy life and laborious life, I found quite enjoyable. I do not say to myself, "Gee, I'm sorry I did this, or I'm sorry they made me do that." I enjoyed it. The plugging ahead. But I think, a good part of the reason for that was the training I got at Latin School, you know.

PK: Good foundation.

JS: Yes.

PK: It became so much a part of you.

JS: Yes.

PK: So, your experience at Latin School gets a vote of thanks from you, then, as a foundation of your life as a scholar?

JS: Yes

PK: I certainly see a lot of those characteristics: discipline, scholarship, and hard work. As we conclude then, shall we say a prayer?

JS: OK.

PK: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.

JS: As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

PK: Thank you.

**Rev. Joseph S. Scannell, S.J.**

**Born:** December 25, 1919, Jamaica Plain,  
Massachusetts

**Entered:** July 30, 1937, Lenox, Massachusetts,  
Shadowbrook

**Ordained:** June 17, 1950, Weston, Massachusetts,  
Weston College

**Final Vows:** August 15, 1954, Worcester, Massachusetts,  
College of the Holy Cross

1933 Boston, Massachusetts: Boston Latin School -  
Student

1937 Lenox, Massachusetts: Shadowbrook - Novitiate,  
Juniorate

1941 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied  
philosophy

1944 Lenox, Massachusetts: Cranwell - Taught first  
year. Shadowbrook - Taught Spanish and German

1946 Boston, Massachusetts: Boston College High  
School - Taught third year

1947 Weston, Massachusetts: Weston College - Studied  
theology

1951 Fairfield, Connecticut: Fairfield University -  
Taught English and Theology

- 1953 Pomfret, Connecticut: St. Robert's Hall -  
Tertiaship
- 1954 Bronx, New York: Fordham University - Studied  
Hebrew at Columbia University
- 1955 Worcester, Massachusetts: College of the Holy  
Cross - Taught first year (1955-59), taught art  
history (1956-85), taught second year (1958-62),  
taught English (1961-87), Art Department Chair  
(1967-73), sabbatical (1974-75), Art Department  
Chair (1979-82), prefect of health for Jesuit com-  
munity (1984-95), professor emeritus (1986), trea-  
surer of Jesuit community (1988-94)
- 1999 Weston, Massachusetts: Campion Center - Praying  
for the Church and the Society

#### Degrees

- 1943 Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-  
Boston College
- 1944 Master of Arts, Philosophy, Weston College-  
Boston College
- 1944 Licentiate in Philosophy, Weston College-Boston  
College
- 1951 Licentiate in Sacred Theology, Weston College