

# “I’d just be sitting there and I’d be homesick for this two-bit place”

## AN INTERVIEW WITH TOMMY MORROW

by Dymphna Savage and Brian Walters of ‘The Pass Times’, December 1983

**Q. Mr. Morrow, could you tell us a little about your early life in Poyntzpass, school etc.?**

*A. I don't know what I could tell you about my early life in Poyntzpass. My mother died when I was nine and I went to live with my grandfather down Chapel Street in what was Tommy Mackle's. I was a bit wild for him, I suppose, so I ended up renting a house next door at one shilling and six pence a week. I was about eleven years of age and I lived on my own there. I stayed there until the war came on. It was a house for a gathering of all the boys. We had boxing gloves in there. When the war came on we used to get the soldiers in there and take cigarettes off them and sell them watered whiskey that was junk. We had a good time during the war. After the war I took off, Tom Burns and I decided we'd go to England – although we'd nothing to go to England with. Then there came an ad in the papers here about coalmining in Scotland. They'd pay your fare though you had to stay 3 months. So Tom and I took off. Kevin Loughlin left us to the train in Portadown. I don't know why we didn't get on a train in the 'Pass but we wanted to do it big. We went to the coalmines Tom and I.*

*It was a rough ordeal. The first thing they did with us was to put us on night shift. We started at 12 o'clock at night. We had to do P.T., exercises and so on. After about 3 or 4 days of that they took us down the mine. It wasn't too nice. After about three days working in the mine they showed us the emergency exit - the way out if the main shaft was blocked. We were about 4,000 ft. down – near enough a mile and to get out by the emergency route took a long time – a whole shift. The emergency shaft was at an angle of 15 degrees – maybe three or four miles. It was cut in steps which were very uneven – a big step and a wee step. There was a rope all the way and there was water all the way. It was an awful bad, dirty hole. I was in front and it was tough, damp and stifling. I kept looking back at Tom and he was getting madder by the minute. When we were half way up he said ‘Archie, that's it, when I get to the top I won't be back’. The next morning Tom was gone, two days later he was back in the 'Pass and he never left since – I think he was wiser than I was. I finished my coalmining training for 3 months. Then I went to Coventry. It had been devastated in the war and I got a job driving a lorry between Birmingham and Coventry. I stayed 3 or 4 years. Then I headed off for Australia. I'll never forget 6th February 1952 – the day the King died. I remember we were going up the gangplank at Southampton in the morning when somebody told us the King had died.*



*We were five weeks on the boat and had a great time. We landed in Australia and things were pretty tough. The times were bad with little work. I worked in the bush on sheep farms. I stayed there for four and a half years. I didn't really like Australia. It was too far from home. Nowadays it's only 20 hours flying. Then it was five or six weeks by boat and it took a lot of money to get home.*

*I fell in with a fellow called Dermot who was Irish too. His aunt had emigrated on the day he was born. She married and was well off. She had a nice house in Perth. Her husband had died a young man. Dermot and I were in and out of her house a lot. Then in the spring of 1956 she died and left him the house and money, about £10,000 – a fortune in 1956. Anyway he sold the house although I advised him not to. It was a lovely house. So this day he said to me “we'll go home”. I had nothing to go home with but he produced two tickets for the boat to Southampton, the S.S. Orion, and three weeks later we set sail. That's how I got home from Australia. So in the summer of 1956 I was back in the 'Pass again.*

*In 1956 I came home from Australia and stayed for six months. Then the people I worked for in Australia came to do a job in Scotland so I went to work for them in Scotland. I took Jim McGrath with me. He got a job as a foreman. Unfortunately he died there. I stayed there for a year or so till the job was finished and it was there that I met my wife. I left there and decided to go and see Canada. I arrived in Quebec in March. It was terrible, French-speaking and pretty rough. I went to the uranium mines eight*

months and saved every penny. You couldn't spend anything up there. It was winter – 40 and 50 degrees below freezing. So I saved all my money and came home and got married.

I took my wife back to Canada. We started out in an old truck and went to the west coast. We stayed in Vancouver until 1980. We had four children, two girls and two boys.

**Q. Where did you go in 1980?**

**A.** In 1980 I went to work in Israel. You may have heard of the "Camp David Agreement" between Egypt and Israel. A part of that agreement was for Israel to hand over two military airports to Egypt. The United States undertook to build Israel two new military bases as part of the deal. They were in the Sinai desert – all parties agreed to this.

The company which won the contract was a company I worked for. They sent over 400 workers, complete office staff, nurses, doctors, teachers etc. The job was to take three years but we completed it in 26 months complete – 2 billion dollars. About 3 weeks before I left, Israel declared war on Lebanon. Those bases were in use and I have pictures of planes going out to Lebanon.

Israel is a very small country – about half the size of Ireland. You can drive from the Lebanese border in the north to the Red Sea in the south in one day. It's fantastic because parts are all desert while the Jordan Valley is absolutely beautiful. They can grow three crops in a year. As soon as one crop is harvested the next one is put in. In other places I've been the heat is unbearable but in Israel it is cold at night. In the early morning from about four in the morning it's beautiful. They grow sugar beet, wheat, vegetables of all kinds and all sorts of fruit.

We finished the job anyway. It was a very interesting place to work. It's where it all began for us after all. From where we were the Dead Sea was a half hour's drive away. We were about 15 miles from Bethlehem and we went into Jerusalem to see the Holy places and to shop every Sunday. I bought a lot of old copper pots, some a thousand years old. It's a very interesting place and well worth going to see – and you know it's only about 2 hours in a plane. It's not far from here.

**Q. Going back to your younger days, I believe you were a bit of a practical joker – could you elaborate?**

**A.** I don't know about that. Everyone was a practical joker in them days. We had no radio, T.V., radio, motor cars. We had nothing maybe only a mouth organ and maybe we'd set out on the street at night. Everybody was a practical joker. I suppose I was a bit wilder than the rest because of my circumstances. I remember one wedding in The Meeting – I was not really responsible, Cyril Purdy was the one who planned it. I had McComb's pony and cart. We filled the bottom of it with hay and as she came through

the Meeting door they picked up the bride and threw her in the cart and the groom stood in tears while I took off up the 'Pass Street with a whole crowd behind. The night the happy couple came home we stuffed the chimney with straw and waited with wet sods for them to come out. It was mean no doubt but it was the sort of thing we did for fun.

There were about twenty young fellas in my house most nights. I had a bargain with them. You don't come unless you bring something with you – 2 eggs, a loaf, some coal and so on. We got up to all sorts of devilment. I remember a night that Terry Murray was there and Francie McCourt and a whole bunch more. I was in the Home Guard then, during the war, for about a week. I was thrown out for shooting rabbits with the gun. Anyway, I had the gun this night and I had to start early the next day – I was walking cattle to Markethill and I said to them "Get out, I'm going to bed early" but they wouldn't go. I went upstairs and got the gun and I came down the stairs firing the gun. They went out everywhere, one ended up in the river, it was winter time and pitch dark. I suppose I could have killed somebody but they went out anyway.

We had the boxing and everyone had to be initiated. Ernie Loughlin, Tommy McComb, Seamus Magill and all these younger ones took part too. Later on we had boxing classes up in the Legion Hall.

During the war there was a lot of fun. There were about 6 cafes in the 'Pass and at night the place was alive with soldiers. Mrs. McCourt, Kirklands in the Court House, Sarah Conlon, Carsons, Hudsons, the Sands girls in Meeting Street, all had restaurants; Jenny Allen was making sandwiches. There was piles of fun.

Acton Lough was a great place to go in them days – it seems there was great weather then. There would have been hundreds at the Lough – from Scarva, Tandragee and everywhere. You might have gone to the 'Point once in a year but Acton Lough was the place.

Kevin Loughlin and I ran around a lot during the War and we tried to make a few shillings for ourselves by getting soldiers cigarettes and chocolates. The Americans out at McIlveen's (Union Lodge) had all sorts of chocolates and cigarettes. Kevin was great with a girl there and one night we went out to see if we could get some supplies. The Guards knew us and they let us in. Anyway to make a long story short we were arrested at gun point. Bayonets and guns. They marched us out – they were Belgians and couldn't speak English – so we discussed our plans for escape and they didn't know what we were talking about. We made a bolt for the door and got to the car and a load of soldiers after us – out by Bickers and down the Buck's Hill. We were driving without lights and going flat out with a truck full of soldiers with guns firing at us. We came up the 'Pass street and we shot down the loanin' and into Peter Gribben's river and they went on up the Markethill Road.

**Q. Can you tell us about your work in Canada and elsewhere?**

*A. I've been in heavy construction since I went to Canada. Dam building, bridge building. In most cases this meant working in "the bush" – wilderness places. I was in Canada for 26 years and I must have spent 15 years in "the bush". My wife and family lived in the city and I would come home every 2 or 3 months.*

*In the summer I would take the family up to where I was working which was great. I worked in New York for 3 or 4 years, I worked in Washington D.C. for 2 years. My family came to Washington with me and to New York. My family have been with me in four continents, – they haven't been to Australia – they can take themselves there if they want to. It does a person good to travel a bit. My youngest son I think has benefited greatly. In school he has been top of his class wherever he has gone. At present he's at school in Texas. American schools are very strange I think. In history for example they only teach American history – nothing else. A Canadian school on the other hand will teach British History, Irish history, European history and so on, but they don't in America.*

**Q. When you came back here after 26 years in Canada, what changes did you see?**

*A. Not an awful lot although everything's for the better. About the 'Pass there's no changes in a way, everybody looks the same. There are changes surely. You are as modern here as any place in Canada or the U.S.A. You are as modern in your dress, home and everything. But to me Poyntzpass has never changed. It's been a virus in me all my life, that I would never get rid of. I could have been well off in America today. I spent more money because of the 'Pass. I brought my wife and kids home here four times and it costs a lot to bring six people back and forward across the Atlantic to stay in hotels etc. I took them to Italy, to Egypt – just because I wanted to call here, just because I have been homesick for this place. I just love Poyntzpass. I've had two or three beautiful homes in Canada. We have everything we have bought in the last 26 years – furniture, drapes, pots and pans – in containers which are due in Belfast any day now. It cost £5000 to ship over. We have everything we need for our house. I never could settle. I'd get a lovely home in a good district, we'd move in, the kids would be at school, everything would be great and I'd just be sitting there and I'd be homesick for this two-bit place here. It's as simple as that. I love the place. I'll maybe take off again for they want me to go to Argentina in the spring time. Whether I'll go or not, I don't know but I know I'll be coming home here. Sometimes when I came home I'd stand at the corner and look up and down the street and I'd say to myself "what did I come here for?" but there's just something about the place, some nostalgia about it that I just love. I miss a lot of the old people*

*who are not here anymore.*

*I was twenty three before I left the 'Pass and there were great times. During the war we had a lot of fun. I remember working for James Magill. Paddy Watters walked the dogs; Davy McSherry was the tractor man; I was a sort of servant-boy. When I'd come home at night, I'd go to the ball-alley. We renovated the ball-alley in 1944-45. Bill Fegan was the barber at the time and he was a great hand-baller and there was Father Gallagher who was here at the time. He was a great player, so was Jim Lennon. At night you couldn't get into the ball-alley – now it's just a dump. It was a fantastic place when I was a kid. You had to queue up to get into it. It was well kept.*

*Things have changed for the better apart from the "Troubles", but it doesn't matter where you go, there's trouble. In Venezuela, my journey to work would take seven minutes but during my journey I had to go through four security checks; soldiers with machine guns. They knew me but it made no difference. Every so often they'd make you get out, examine your papers, search you, search the truck – you can't go into a bank or a supermarket without a check – especially on government works. When you are working in a foreign country you have to go by their ways. In Venezuela they have a hero – Simon Bolivar – and it doesn't matter what office or works you have, Simon Bolivar's picture must be there. If a government officer came in and Bolivar's picture wasn't there you'd be arrested immediately and no excuse. We had one American and he got annoyed with a Venezuelan one morning and he tore the picture down. Within six hours he was on a plane to America – but on a stretcher, nearly dead – they pistol-whipped him and bayoneted him. They're fanatical – you dare not step out of line. They particularly dislike Americans. I believe that 75% of the world detests Americans, but they all love the dollar. They want to dress like Americans, drive big American cars but they detest Americans because of their power.*

**Q. You mentioned you had been to India. Could you tell us about that?**

*A. Well that was the worst place I've ever seen in my life – human beings lying on the street in filth; deformed people, no hands, no legs, just lying begging on the streets. It was unbelievable; flies by the millions.*

*I used to wonder what it would be like to live in Russia or Africa but now I know that people are the same the world over. They're just human beings. It doesn't matter where you go, the woman gets up in the morning, gets her husband's breakfast, the kids go to school, the woman's out shopping. They're all trying to get a home together, trying to get better furniture, just struggling as we are. It doesn't matter if they are black, white, pygnies, they're trying to have a better way of life. The similarities are amazing. It's sad there has to be trouble.*