

Meghan Townes
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Oral History

Narrator Biography: Elsie C. Diggins

Elsie Anne Clarkin (later Diggins) was born March 18, 1948 into a large family of Fox Pointers. The youngest of eight, she followed her two older sisters and five older brothers into the first floor of the family home at 74 Hope Street, where she continues to reside. Her father, Matthew Clarkin, had immigrated during the 1920s from Fauldhouse, Scotland (although he was of Irish parentage) to Fox Point, intending to stay only six months with an aunt but instead settling down for life. Her mother, Elsie Hanes, who was also of Scottish descent but had been born and raised in Nova Scotia, came to Fox Point in search of a job. Mrs. Diggins remembers the home-life they created for their children as “fun. It was a lot of fun. There was always somebody around to do something with,” but is careful to note the high expectations her parents placed on their offspring. Her older brothers and their friends also played an important role in keeping her out of trouble, monitoring her behavior beyond the family home.

Like her siblings, Mrs. Diggins attended Cleary School, the parish school for St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, from kindergarten through ninth grade, and some of her fondest memories relate to time spent at Cleary. The community that existed around St. Joseph’s and the school was tight-knit, coming together in times of hardship and celebration. Mrs. Diggins’s Fox Point was not restricted to the Irish Catholic community, however; as she relates, “[W]e had all different ethnic people, and we all got along.” The shock of attending Hope High School and encountering racial and ethnic separation remains one of her strongest memories. Coming of age during the Vietnam years also left an impression, and her narration indicates that Fox Point was not free from the societal tensions of that era.

Mrs. Diggins remains deeply connected to her neighborhood. She and husband James Diggins, a Providence native, raised their three children in the Hope Street house, and remain active in community life. Recently retired from working as a meter-checker around Brown’s campus, Mrs. Diggins is still involved with St. Joseph’s as well as Ireland’s 32, a heritage organization. Although sometimes she feels like a “leper” amongst all the new residents, she is happy that the physical fabric of the Point has been maintained and continues to enjoy “old home week” meetings with other Fox Pointers.