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Oral History Interview of Maurice Gillen (OH-057)

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Oral History Interview of Maurice “Moe” Gillen

Interview Date: February 14, 2006

Interviewed by: Corinne Petraglia, student from History 364: Oral History

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Interview Summary

Maurice “Moe” Gillen, a lifelong resident of Charlestown, Massachusetts, discusses his community activism related to the 1974 Garrity decision, which required some students to be bused from one Boston neighborhood to another with the goal of creating racial balance in the Boston Public Schools. The interview covers his work with the Charlestown Committee on Education and the Citywide Coordinating Council; reactions to the Garrity decision in Charlestown and other Boston neighborhoods; media coverage of the aftermath of the decision; and his feelings about the decision and its impact on the Boston Public Schools.

Subject Headings

Busing for school integration

Charlestown (Boston, Mass.)

Citywide Coordinating Council

Garrity, W. Arthur (Wendell Arthur), 1920-1999

Gillen, Maurice “Moe”

Morgan v. Hennigan (379 F. Supp. 410)



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This interview took place on February 14, 2006.

Interview Transcript

CORINNE PETRAGLIA: Okay, what's your full name?

MAURICE "MOE" GILLEN: Maurice J. "Moe" Gillen, but people call me Moe.

PETRAGLIA: And how old are you?

GILLEN: At present, I am sixty-seven years old.

PETRAGLIA: Alright, and where were you born?

GILLEN: Charlestown.

PETRAGLIA: Did you—have you lived there your whole life?

GILLEN: My whole life.

PETRAGLIA: And you still live there now?

GILLEN: Yes, I do.

PETRAGLIA: What was your involvement in the Garrity decision?¹

¹ The Garrity decision refers to the June 21, 1974, opinion filed by Judge W. Arthur Garrity in the case of *Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James Hennigan et al.* (379 F. Supp. 410). Judge Garrity ruled that the Boston School Committee had "intentionally brought about and maintained racial segregation" in the Boston Public Schools. When the school committee did not submit a workable desegregation plan as the opinion had required, the court established a plan that called for some students to be bused from their own neighborhoods to attend schools in other neighborhoods, with the goal of creating racial balance in the Boston Public Schools. (See <http://www.lib.umb.edu/archives/garrity2.html> for more information)

GILLEN: At the time it was coming down in 1974, I had been president of the Kennedy Multi-Service Center Social Agency in Charlestown, and organized the group because we had to prepare the community because they [students from other neighborhoods] were going to come to Charlestown in '75. So in anticipation of that, we realized that we didn't have the political clout that South Boston or East Boston had, that we had to organize and get a voice into the procedures.

So as such, under the auspices of the Kennedy Center, we organized a Charlestown Committee on Education. And the Charlestown Committee on Education took in the elected officials, representatives of the social agencies, and representatives of organizations that were adamantly opposed to a term we call forced busing, and the few people—individuals that supported it.

PETRAGLIA: So how did you come to be involved in civil service and public—?

GILLEN: Judge [W. Arthur] Garrity had a representative from the Justice Department, the Community Relations Department. He was more or less the street person for the judge and was trying to attempt to resolve problems that were coming up. It was a forgone conclusion that busing was going to come; it was a question of the depth it would be. Eddie McCormack,² the former attorney general of Massachusetts, who was appointed as a master by Judge Garrity to develop a comprehensive plan that would minimize the busing. And it was our belief, it was my strong belief, that unless we could get input into that plan, that Charlestown would have no say. So therefore, we organized to prepare our position and presented it to the master plan. From that, apparently it came under the attention of Judge Garrity.

PETRAGLIA: And that was the [Citywide] Coordinating Council?

GILLEN: The Coordinating Council. The Coordinating Council was forty members of Boston, the greater community of Boston, that represented specific interest groups. There was a representative, for instance, from [Boston] Latin School; the Latin School alumni had a representative. The Home School Association. A lot of the civil rights organizations had

² Edward J. McCormack, Jr. (1923-) served as Massachusetts Attorney General from 1959 to 1963.

representatives on it, and business groups had it. Judge Garrity deemed that what Charlestown had done to try to prepare for this or prevent violence—asked whether I would serve as an opponent, so that we could get some input and hopefully prevent excesses.

PETRAGLIA: Okay, so you were an opponent of the Garrity decision?

GILLEN: Absolutely. A father of six kids at the time. I had—one of my daughters was at Charlestown High, indeed was a freshman at Charlestown High the year before the busing in '74, and we saw what was happening in South Boston, to the point that in '75, the wife and I decided to take her out of Charlestown High and put her in a Catholic high school. She substantively insisted on being with her friends and going to Charlestown High and she did return and indeed graduated from Charlestown High.

PETRAGLIA: Did you take her out—did it have to do with the Garrity decision or was it because of your involvement?

GILLEN: Well it was a bit of both, having seen—as a concerned parent and having seen the violence that had taken place in South Boston the year before. As a parent, I was taking the option of, basically if they were going to make us put our child on a bus, we were going to choose what bus they got on, and therefore we chose to send them to parochial school. And I would say that—some of my children graduated from public high schools and some of my children graduated from parochial high schools—more of what they wanted to do. But with the terrible violence that took place in South Boston, parentally, we wanted to protect our daughter and also we're this prominent in the issue, [so] I didn't want to subject any of my kids to the pressures.

PETRAGLIA: So were any of your younger children bused to different cities?

GILLEN: No, there was—none of our children. Because of the geocode, they would've been in public school within Charlestown. There was none that—

PETRAGLIA: None that would have been assigned to them.

GILLEN: And the middle school, they were in parochial school, so the only school that our children went to during busing was the high school.

PETRAGLIA: Was that the general feeling with other parents?

GILLEN: Well the concept of our Committee on Education was we were absolutely, and we continued to be of the opinion that the parent should have the control of the children—their own children and the choices of education for their children. So that logic would follow that if that parent chose to put their child or children on a bus, then they were totally entitled to that selection and if a parent chose not to put their child on the bus, they too were within their rights, as we saw, to do what was best for their child.

PETRAGLIA: In the neighborhood in Charlestown, what was the general feeling about the Garrity decision? Did people—

GILLEN: People were adamantly opposed to it, and we had a core group of—that put the name Powder Keg as a name of a group. It was mostly a mothers' group that protested by having mothers' marches with saying the rosary; it was a predominantly Irish Catholic community with a sprinkle of Italian families, but overwhelmingly Irish Catholic. And they would take a weekly march, and they got to the point that the U.S. marshals would monitor them and they got on a first name basis with the marshals and most people knew that they were only exercising their right as they saw it to protest what they felt was an illicit act by the government.

With that, the only violence we really had in Charlestown through this period—there was what I would attribute to adolescent violence at the high school, and it was severe and physical fights. The police were located—the state police had been assigned to South Boston and the metropolitan police and Boston police had been assigned to Charlestown High. Now at the time the Boston police had established the TPF, the Tactical Police Force, and they were their shock

troops, and they were not user-friendly. It was more of a scare, Gestapo-type of thing where they would come in and intimidate the community and harass citizens.

At one point, probably the toughest point that we had, we had a mothers' march that they insisted would not pass by the schools and the mothers insisted that they would pass by the schools, and I, as a moderator, was attempting to assure the officials that the mothers meant no harm and were not a threat or a danger to anybody. And they were—the government was asserting their right to dictate where the march would be. The mothers stopped and knelt down on High Street in Charlestown, a block from the high school, and we tried to work out an agreement that they could pass by within a block of the high school. The officials—and not the local captain; the local captain, Captain MacDonald at the time, had established excellent relationships with the mothers' group and had clearly identified people that might be of a problem. And we all worked so that there was no violence, and I can truthfully say there was not a stone thrown at any bus in Charlestown. There was no violence.

PETRAGLIA: So the violence in Charlestown was more amongst—

GILLEN: In Charlestown High School.

PETRAGLIA: In the high school?

GILLEN: But as far as the buses being able to come and go—there were protests, not unlike a union. People would maybe make some yells, but absolutely no violence and we worked very hard to prevent violence. The only violence that took place on the street was when the TPF assaulted the mothers at the corner of High and Cordis Streets, when the MDC [Metropolitan District Commission] police had everything under control and the TPF came out, and we had a couple of young boys arrested when they saw their mothers being mauled, literally, by the overwhelming and overuse of force by the tactical police, [and] went to their mothers' aid. And fortunately we were able to disengage this issue and keep and restore—our local priests were there and cooler heads than the TPF prevailed. And those boys that were arrested—local

attorneys, in particular Charles “Buddy” Clifford, represented them at no cost and each and every one of them were let go with no charges.

That was the turmoil within the community, and then as a proponent of nonviolence and as an opponent of the design plan, I was able to put position papers forward to the public and to the court. And some of the things we asked for were granted; most of them were not granted.

PETRAGLIA: What kind of things did you ask for?

GILLEN: Well the original plan was to send—totally destroy control of parents. If you had a range of students, some in the elementary school, some in the middle school, some in the high school, then without any rhyme or reason, only by a geocode, only because of the address they lived at, the student was sent to Roxbury, this student was sent to the South End, this student was sent to—so they’re breaking up the families as we understood it. And one of the things that I was able to achieve was that the judge made a concession and if you had one child in a school, then the younger child would be able to go [to the same school]. And in light of the time, that was a major accomplishment. There were some other individual case-by-case things that I was able to bring forward—and they were heard on a case-by-case basis—that wouldn’t have happened had we have been a part of this thing.

PETRAGLIA: So on the Coordinating Council, you said there were forty members; how were all of you joined in opposition to busing?

GILLEN: They were all for it—thirty-nine were for, one against.

PETRAGLIA: And that was you?

GILLEN: And that was me. And Judge Garrity had respected my position; did not agree with it, but he respected it. I think he respected the integrity of the person that was the opponent, that he had some character, and a man of his word, and so on. So the fact that Judge Garrity appointed me on to the executive board that would meet with him in his chambers—and Arthur Gartland

was the chairman of the Coordinating Council and Father Michael Groden of the Archdiocese [of Boston] was the executive director, and Eddie McCormack was on that executive committee, and others.

I think the meeting that stands out to me at one time—I repeat this story now because it is to be archived and it's not generally a public thing. I had a meeting in which Judge Garrity in his own chambers, in the privacy, basically, of his own home, said in frustration to different groups coming with their own agendas as opposed to the agenda of educating the children of Boston. And in that context he said, "Look, I don't live in Boston, I live in Wellesley, and it would seem to me, Judge Garrity, that the people of Boston must address this issue to resolve the problem so their kids are educated." It was said in executive session, only six, seven members at the most. A day later, that quote was in the Boston newspapers and Judge Garrity was vilified by all parties, particularly the opponents, for making what they perceived as a callous comment.

At a subsequent session of the general body, not the executive body, I approached Judge Garrity and I said, "Your honor, I want you to know I respect a man's home and I would never publicly use a comment as you made and give that to the press as a tool." And he said to me, "Moe, of all the people in the room, I know you would certainly be the one that would not take advantage."

So some of the things that happened through it, happened in spite of what Judge Garrity saw as a noble venture and I saw as an evil happenstance. I think the proof is in the pudding if we look at it forty years later, the Boston school system, better or worse, and we had a lot of social problems in that period, and the answer is the system is worse and we have had an outstanding extent of social problems, much of it people like myself bring back to the forced busing.

PETRAGLIA: Now, on the Coordinating Council, what was it like being the only person that opposed?

GILLEN: Well, that's easy, I'm the youngest of five, and now I'm probably still the youngest—I have six kids and a wife, so to be in the minority position is not unusual. I think that I was very clear and my community was very clear on what we felt were our rights as parents. And we did

not begrudge any other parent to hold the right that they held. Our adamant position was that we should not be forced to send our children where we did not feel they would achieve an education. And now you have a situation where they're busing kids across the city and the situation is still wrong. It's just plain wrong; it does not work.

Given we've come to a contemporary time now, that the court, in its wisdom, has ruled that they can use eminent domain to take a man's house away. And there's been an upheaval, and people are very upset about that, there's going to be a change in that law. It would be up here—we felt the same way about our parental choices and we worked towards that end. And there was terrible violence and Boston was labeled as a racist city, and we weren't a racist city. We were a city of neighborhoods, and it's difficult for people to understand the concept of neighborhoods so strong in Boston; that doesn't apply in other cities.

PETRAGLIA: How did your involvement with the councils affect your personal life with your friends and within the neighborhood of Charlestown?

GILLEN: Well it didn't make life easy, but I had been active in my union, I had been active in social issues in the town, I had coached a youth team. So there was a lot of outreach from myself, my wife allowing me to be shared with others. But the bottom line always was that what I did in social service stopped, and I had privacy of my family life. So the point that I was interviewed by hundreds if not thousands of press, it was always done outside the home, with the exception of Tony Lukas, who wrote the book *Common Ground*.³ And Tony Lukas approached me one day and identified himself as another, as I put it, pointy-headed liberal (laughter), that wanted to do a book on the essence of the dispute. And what was, as he termed it, what was the common ground that that parents in Boston had. And he asked me to get him a family in Charlestown to be the Charlestown family. He initially asked if it would be my family, if I would do it. And I imposed the position I've always had, that my family life is my family life and my wife and kids should not be subjected to any pressures because of what my public life is.

³ *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* is a Pulitzer-prize winning book written by J. Anthony Lukas and published in 1986. Lukas chronicles the Garrity decision era from the perspective

So then he asked for a family, then he went out and sought a family. And he asked my views, and I told him, I said, “Tony, the family you’ve selected, in the end, bottom line, will not sign to go public.” And he said, “Oh no, of course they will, they’ve said they will.” I said, “Tony, you’re a Pulitzer Prize winner, and I’m a guy from the town. I’m telling you, that family you’ve selected will not do it.” About a year and a half later, my phone rang; it’s Tony Lukas, and he says, “Moe, we have a problem.” I said, “Tony, we don’t have a problem, you have a problem.” He says, “I need the family you’ve suggested,” which was the McGoff family. And I said, “Are you crazy? You want me to now, a year and a half later, go down and ask Alice McGoff as to whether she would subject herself and her family to this?” And he said yes. So I said, “Look, all I can do is go down and ask Alice whether she’ll do it or not.”

Went down to Alice’s house, and talked with her, and my position was, as it is now, being willing to speak to these archives, is that if we don’t speak, our position, and the rightness of our position, will not be kept; there’ll be no record of it. And the victors write history, so even though we’re not victors, we have to do what we can to have a history. So Alice, after yelling at me, and cursing me and so on, agreed to do the book, be the family. They did a great part. The book came out great, and there’s a record now in publication of a simple family in Charlestown that went through the busing period.

PETRAGLIA: What is your opinion on the press’s role in the whole situation?

GILLEN: The press? The press make things a zoo. You know the ones that chase the celebrities with all the cameramen? It was the same thing. When I went out to work the first day of busing—I worked for Boston Edison; I had to go to work, and I was coming back in after work and there were helicopters hovering over, a dozen or more helicopters. When I got in there were sharp shooters and snipers on different buildings. The media was a combination of vultures and piranhas, going to our kids and taking emotional statements that the kids would say in any hectic place. And we tried to get them to speak to leadership and the more rational thing, but they didn’t want to do that. But there were others that did; it was interesting, all the interviews that I did, and there were national TV, etcetera—I got a call one day from a reporter that said he’d like to speak

of three families, two white and one black.

to me and I said, “Well, certainly.” And he said, “This will be an oral interview.” And I said, “Fine.” He said, “I’m from the *Voice of America*.” And I said, “Fine; I don’t know what the *Voice of America* wants with Moe Gillen, but fine.” For those people later on who don’t know what the *Voice of America* is, it was American government’s, basically, propaganda radio that used to broadcast primarily behind the Iron Curtain, the *Voice of America* and so on, and by law, anything that was broadcast could not be broadcast in America. When they did the—after the assassination of President Kennedy, and they put together a days of light and days of drums, the thing of Kennedy and the assassination and so on, that was the one exception they made that it could be shown in America.

So I asked them then, why, first of all, why would they want to speak to me, and then what worth would it be to the *Voice of America*? He said because of the violence that was being depicted by national and international news media, they were getting a lot of inquiries and a lot of counter propaganda, if you will, behind the iron curtain, as to if the United States of America is such a democracy, how can they have rioting in the street on an issue, how are they working? And he said that myself and my group were the best example of how people could legitimately protest our government and action without breaking the law and asserting our rights as citizens.

So he walked me through a whole series of questions that went back to, at the time, proponents of busing were saying we had to adhere to the law of the land and the Supreme Court. And I was able to point out to the proponents of supporting the Supreme Court ruling that there had been a case by the Supreme Court called the Dred Scott case,⁴ in which the Supreme Court of the United States said that a black man was property, and thank God there were millions of Americans that disagreed with that. We had ultimately a civil war over the issue. And we were vindicated and the people that would feel like me, that a black man is not a property; he or she is a citizen just like I am or any other American. So to say that you support it blindly is not so—at one time federal income tax was unconstitutional; at one time, women could not vote. So there’s a lot of things that the Supreme Court supported that have subsequently been proven differently. So we, and our system, can in fact oppose what we feel is an unjust ruling, even if it’s a ruling by the Supreme Court.

⁴ The full name of the case is *Dred Scott v. Sandford* [60 U.S. \(19 How.\) 393](#) (1857).

PETRAGLIA: And you told that to the *Voice of America*?

GILLEN: Yes I did, and I don't know whether that led to the Berlin Wall coming down (laughter) or led to having the wall up for many more years.

PETRAGLIA: Looking back, do you stand by your opinion? Is there anything you would have done differently?

GILLEN: We're spending forty million dollars to bus minorities to go to school with other minorities. There's no question that there's been white flight. There's no question that the demographics of the city has totally changed. A lot of it has stemmed from the busing. There has been a destruction in large parts of the neighborhood. And not too long ago, I attended a seminar at the Old State House about busing in Boston. And one proponent of busing at the time got up at that session and said, "Boston is a better place today." And I got up and said, "Better for who?" They've taken the most Irish Catholic city in America and we are no longer an Irish Catholic majority. We're not even a northern European majority. And the prices have gotten outrageous so that our children cannot afford to live in our communities, whether it be Charlestown, South Boston, East Boston, wherever it is. And that to me does not make it better. It might make it better for the new people, certainly not better in the context of the people that were here.

PETRAGLIA: Having lived in Charlestown your whole life, how do you feel the decision affected where you're from, where you grew up, and the people around there?

GILLEN: Well, what we tried to do—the whole idea of the Charlestown Committee on Education was to minimize the impact on our community of this edict that we were not going to be able to stop. So that the idea is that we would not, ourselves, do violence that would cause any of our community to leave. There was a greater exodus in other sections of the city than there was in Charlestown because we held strictly to the concept that it was parental choice, and if the parent chose, as some did, to put their kid on a bus, that was their right and that was to be respected, and if they chose not to, that would be all right.

At the time of the busing, just before the busing came, we had three parochial schools in Charlestown. There are those that suspect that in a preemptive strike one of our parochial schools, St. Mary's, was closed a couple years before or a year before busing, eliminating seats where our kids could take alternatives. We are suspect that that wasn't a preemptive strike to force us on to the buses, which they didn't do, because we didn't get on the buses, we got on the buses that we picked. Our kids went to Medford and Somerville and every place they could go to escape forced busing. Some people call that free transportation; we call it forced busing.

PETRAGLIA: Tell me more about—do you feel that there was white flight and do you think that busing was better or worse for Charlestown?

GILLEN: It was worse. Understand the context. Now we're talking in my experiences born and bred in Charlestown, a parent, married to a high school sweetheart, if you would, my wife born and bred—she lives today, after forty-six years of marriage, she lives today, one house away from where she grew up. And I live about eight streets from where I grew up. So that was the atmosphere, that's the way it was. Whether people like it or don't like it, that's the way we lived.

In my public life, we had been subjected to urban renewal. My wife and I were supporters of urban renewal; we worked very hard to replace a state penitentiary with a college on the same grounds. It was our belief that we would take advantage of the urban renewal to get a totally new education system. Now bear this in mind, we worked to get it, made sacrifices on the urban renewal. We got two new elementary schools, we got a junior college, we were on our way to getting a high school, and our next objective was to get a new middle school, so that we'd be totally encased in our little cocoon of Charlestown and our kids could go from kindergarten to junior college and never leave the town. After we got those built—immediately after we got those built, and while Charlestown High was questionable whether it would be built or not under the master plan, put forth by Eddie McCormack and Mayor Kevin White⁵ and so on, they called to not build Charlestown High. As those things were built and our kids were told they couldn't

⁵ Kevin White (1929-), a Democrat, served as mayor of Boston from 1968 to 1984.

go to those schools—how would any parent feel? And they were told to go to the alleged inferior schools in other sections of the city.

It was always our belief that they could've ordered changes that did not involve mass forced busing; they could've ordered distribution of teachers, etcetera, that they wouldn't have done. One of the concessions, allegedly—I can't speak absolutely, but I'm led to believe by people that can speak absolutely—that Judge Garrity ordered Charlestown High built, and if other leadership in the city had had their way, it wouldn't have been built. So I don't know if that's good or bad but it was clearly a concession by the judge to the concept that the community had spoken to.

PETRAGLIA: Okay, is there any—what are your final thoughts on your experiences on the Coordinating Council and anything like that in your life?

GILLEN: Well some years later—some years later, I was in town shopping with my wife. I was aggravating her, so she said why don't you go up to Arch Street to church, and I'll meet up you later. So I did, I went up, being the docile parent and husband, I go up to Arch Street, I go to mass, and I see this tall person going down the center isle, bald spot on the top. And I said, "That's Judge Garrity." This is after he's retired. So we go to mass, we come out, and I stop to greet him and I said, "Isn't this a wonderful country? Isn't this a wonderful country, Judge, that two people as diverse as we are can go pray to our same God and clearly pray for different things?" And it certainly had broadened my experience far beyond what a local guy working for a utility would have as far as contact with public figures.

Gail Sheehy, there's one of her books, I'm in. I'm in her *Pathfinders* book.⁶ Again, to protect the family, it's not as my name, but I'll sell it now for the archives. I'm in under as Bingo Doyle, a blue collar general, and it's about the experiences of a working guy undergoing the trauma of busing while you're trying to raise and protect your family.

PETRAGLIA: So overall, are you happy that you were so involved with your community?

⁶ *Pathfinders* by Gail Sheehy was published in 1982 by Bantam.

GILLEN: Well, I don't know. (laughs) I think I did the right thing as a citizen that believes in participating in government. I have a brother that's a missionary. He's devoted his life to helping the poor. He's in the Philippines now. He's developed—he built two hospitals in the jungles for the mentally ill. And another brother gave thirty years of his life and more to the United States Navy, and his career culminated with him being captain of the *U.S.S. Constitution*. So I come from a family of people that believe—brought up by our parents to—we don't necessarily have to have a lot to share, but the commitment that we should share. And it's been a terrific experience.

I now work for a dynamic state senator, Senator Jarrett Barrios, who is as different from me as you could possibly be in his lifestyle, his education level, lots of things. The one thing that we share and the most important thing for him in hiring me is the commitment to help other people. So had I not had the experience through the busing crucible, then somebody like Senator Barrios would probably not have asked me to do the work I do with him. So I think it's been important and it's still important, and we still believe that we can oppose, legally, unjust rulings by the Supreme Court.

PETRAGLIA: Well, thank you so much for your time, and anything else you'd like to say or—?

GILLEN: No, that should—we did pretty good, right?

END OF INTERVIEW