

Oral History Project	Achill Oral Histories
Oral Historian	Ryan Wellman
Interviewee	Kieran Sweeney
Track no	1
Date and time	Saturday 13th June 2026 5:30 p.m.
Location of interview	Kieran Sweeney Crafts & Knitwear in Achill Sound
Running time	22:44

2 Ryan Wellman: Hello and good morning. It's about 8.30 o'clock on Saturday, June 13th. My name is
3 Ryan Wellman. I'm joined here with Kieran Sweeney. We are sitting inside of Kieran's shop here right
4 in Achill Sound. Kieran, thank you so much for joining me today.

5 Kieran Sweeney: You're very welcome.

6 Ryan Wellman: We're going to get started with just pretty basic, pretty simple. What are some of
7 your first memories of growing up in Achill?

8 Kieran Sweeney: I came from Sraheens, which is up the road about a mile. We were, I'm part of
9 three people in the family, my three siblings and my parents. My father came from Corraun, but my
10 mother came from Roscommon. And the way I would tell the story then would be that my
11 grandfather came to Achill back in the 1940s. I'm not sure about the timing or anything. And he
12 ended up in Sweeney's in the big store on the bridge. And as far as I'm aware, without going into too
13 much detail, he had to leave Sweeney's on a dispute there, and he went up the street in the middle
14 of the sound, towards the middle of the sound, and he set up a business there, which I have
15 inherited in a different form here, now. It was a traditional clothing shop for older people, trousers,
16 skirts, window blinds, curtains for the houses for people. And that's where that continued. In the
17 1970s, when I came into the business after being in school in Galway, secondary school not college
18 and we moved to this point here the new building was built and I was actually digging part of the

19 foundation as a 17 year old so I'm in I'm in this building for forever and stuck here and then my
20 father of course married my mother I'm going backwards now here but my father married my
21 mother and he had been working in Sweeney's as it happens as well but after they got married my
22 grandfather died a week before I was born and he inherited the business with my mother and they
23 ran it quite successfully in the dark old days of the 1950s and 60s, early 60s. Can we stop?

24 Ryan Wellman: Yeah, of course. Take as much time as you need. Just take a quick pause.

25 Kieran Sweeney: When I came into the business, it was the traditional clothing and footwear, etc.
26 and over time and it probably took me twenty years to transform the business from what it had
27 been into a craft shop and in the interim period as well I started using computers very poorly but it
28 enhanced my business and I decided I'd set up a separate company from the shop, Achill Signs and I
29 do signage of all kinds, printing, signage and that has been a pleasure to do because it's a challenging
30 thing to do doing graphic work that I had never experienced previously and I'm very happy doing
31 that but I'm also twice as happy welcoming customers to the shop, talking to them giving them help
32 if I can, and that has been fading up to now up to this period. I have two brothers. One is in South
33 America and the other guy is in Galway and he set up his own businesses there as well. We have five
34 children, none of which took the opportunity to come into the business. They're spread out, London,
35 Madrid, South America, no sorry, London, Dublin and we have 10 grandchildren.

36 Ryan Wellman: Wow, impressive. Congratulations.

37 Kieran Sweeney: That's the background to all of this. My wife Nora puts up with me quite well,
38 telling me to retire for a long time. And I'm 77 years of age now.

39 Ryan Wellman: So we could sort of transition into. What were some of your first memories from
40 being in the shop? I know you said you helped lay some of the foundation for the building. What are
41 some of your first memories after that? Did you help out while your mom and dad were running it?

42 Kieran Sweeney: Oh, I did, certainly, yeah. My father mainly, although my mother was the
43 bookkeeper, now that I think about it, she was good at figures. I helped him in the shop. He had a
44 different method to me. He was very kind to people, very patient. I noticed that. Older people
45 particularly, they'd be slow walking. He was always understanding. And he was certainly one thing
46 that I'll never forget. During the back in the 1950s, he told me that when people came into the shop,
47 and it continued when I started as well, if people were going to England to work, which they were in
48 big numbers, they wouldn't have clothing for a Sunday mass and I'd say the mother decided that the
49 son would have to have a good suit for going to mass and he would give the clothing to the lady to
50 give to her son to bring to Scotland or wherever they were working and when they came back home
51 again a few months later after their period working the mother would immediately come into the
52 shop and pay the bill. That has stuck in my head forever. It's very hard to do that nowadays.

53 Ryan Wellman: That's an amazing story though. It teaches you sort of how to be a good person and a
54 good business owner.

55 Kieran Sweeney: Absolutely, yes. I inherited a lot of that from them or from him.

56 Ryan Wellman: That's fantastic. Have you, so I know you said that you sort of innovated the business
57 a little bit when it came to you. What were some of the things that made you want to innovate with
58 the business and start doing things like signs and more crafts?

59 Kieran Sweeney: At the time I felt that there was something missing, but in the meantime before I
60 did that, now thinking back again correctly, clothing was the main part of the business and footwear.
61 And over time to me, it didn't seem like it was going to be as successful as it had previously, in my
62 head anyway. So I thought, what can I do? And I had bought a computer, 2,000 pounds then, back in
63 the early 70s, I think. And I brought my son in, my eldest son, to tell him, sit down with me and we'll
64 work this thing out. And he was gone within 20 minutes. And I said, you know, this is for you as
65 much as for me, but he never came back to the computer. But he ended up in England using
66 computers, which is the peculiar side of it. I can do a lot of work with my hands and I did all the

67 fitting out of the shop as well at that period, around that period also. So that didn't cost anything to
68 do. And as I say, I transformed it in one sense, but I still carry crafts that are made by some local
69 people. I make things myself that I can sell. I can print stuff. I can print photographs. I can do
70 signage, as I said earlier.

71 Ryan Wellman: So what has been kind of the main key for staying successful in your business in your
72 eyes?

73 Kieran Sweeney: One of the rules in the back of my head, I suppose, way back in it, is being nice to
74 people, being more than helpful to people, which I get praise for quite often. Even if you are having
75 a bad day, somebody else might be having a worse day and you want to treat them very well. And
76 people understand that as well, because it's difficult nowadays to get pleasant treatment in stores
77 and everything, I notice that when I'm traveling or going anywhere else. So that's the rule here, like.

78 Ryan Wellman: Is there, we'll sort of switch topics a little bit to talking more about Achill as a whole,
79 as the island. Is there anything you've noticed that's been a really noticeable change throughout
80 your time, you know, growing up in Achill to now, like, what has been the main change that you've
81 seen or some main changes?

82 Kieran Sweeney: It seems everybody is richer. Going on the houses when I was a child, there were
83 three room cottages, very well kept considering people wouldn't have a lot of money. In the modern
84 times now we have holiday homes from everywhere, being built everywhere, sorry, and people
85 seem to be well off. We have people here now that are on holiday most of the year and when they
86 retire they come here. So it's kind of a different environment, and I depend on tourism quite a lot.
87 That's about 30% of my business, I would imagine, you know. What else has changed? I suppose
88 everything. The environment has improved in the sense of the roads, the networks, the facilities,
89 even though there's a shortage now of food places and places like that for people to eat or to stay
90 sometimes there's a shortage in the peak season the local population have got together in some

91 sense organizing like the marathon, music festivals, traditional music so that draws customers to me
92 as well like it's always good for business to have a variety of stuff in an area you know?

93 Ryan Wellman: So what, or sort of, if you could, can you just share a memorable moment that you
94 have either from your business or just from living in Achill, anything? Just what's one memory that's,
95 you know, sort of crucial to your business that you think of? I know you mentioned a story with your
96 father, but anything else from when your time of, you know, being in charge here?

97 Kieran Sweeney: I can't recall anything that sticks in my head immediately, so it might come to me
98 before the end of the interview.

99 Ryan Wellman: Okay.

100 Kieran Sweeney: I'll try and think on that one.

101 Ryan Wellman: All right. So we can stay on the topic of your shop here. What would be some advice
102 you would give to someone interested in starting not a similar shop, but just a business of their own
103 in Achill?

104 Kieran Sweeney: Be well prepared. Have a good bit of money backing you if you're renting, buying
105 whatever in the area. I don't know what else I can give advice to people. I would talk to anybody that
106 has spoken to me over the years or that speaks to me and if they want advice, if I'm anyway helpful
107 in any areas of business, I would be very prepared to help them.

108 Ryan Wellman: Any thoughts on the memorable moment at all?

109 Kieran Sweeney: I can't think of anything just right now.

110 Ryan Wellman: Okay.

111 Kieran Sweeney: That's something that sprang to mind before.

112 Ryan Wellman: What area of Achill did you originally, or what area of Achill are you from originally?

113 Kieran Sweeney: I'm from Sraheens, which is a village just to the left onto the Atlantic Drive Road. An
114 awful lot of houses in that village unfortunately are closed. I'd say it's one of the heaviest closings of
115 houses that I've seen on the island. People that were living there and used to go to England, their
116 offspring followed them. So then there's nobody there to take care of the house. So the houses are
117 all in disrepair, including my own family home that I don't own, which is awful to see. It would be
118 nice to be able to have a scheme really to use those houses. And the government have tried on a
119 number of occasions with grants and everything, but it doesn't seem to be working in certain parts
120 and certain areas, and it would be lovely to see people back in these homes. An awful shame.

121 Ryan Wellman: Of course. Do you have any memories from that childhood home?

122 Kieran Sweeney: I do. I just probably say that now as something springs to mind. The long summer
123 evening, we happened to have a field up by the river in trains, and we had to cross over the river.
124 Actually, there was no bridge. And we used to play football in the evening. And we could play all
125 night until my parents, who were fairly strict, or my mother particularly, would come and call us
126 before the time we used to always think, but we'd be out for three hours playing football, you know,
127 with the rest of the people in the village, you know, the youngsters the same age as myself, you
128 know. So that's a very happy time in my head, you know. And after that then, of course, I went to
129 boarding school in Galway, which was a different environment totally altogether, you know.
130 Enclosed at 13 years of age, it was kind of tough, to say the least.

131 Ryan Wellman: How did that experience shape you?

132 Kieran Sweeney: I think it hardened me a bit. And whether, and I wasn't soft or anything, but I used
133 to have a couple of scraps with people in there, they'd be picking on you, and my reaction was, give
134 them a punch and they might stay away, you know, which was not the right thing to do, looking back
135 on it. I defended myself quite well, and again I took part in sports a lot. Played handball very, very
136 well. Played football and hurling, not hurling for the college, but I played football for the college and

137 represented them against other colleges in Connacht and enjoyed all of that and I was reasonably
138 good at football, Gaelic football.

139 Ryan Wellman: Were you relieved to be done and come back home?

140 Kieran Sweeney: I was at the time, but I still didn't know and I don't know what clicked with me and
141 said, maybe this is what I should do. My parents insisted I got trained for the drapery business,
142 which was previously had been in the shop. And they sent me to a shop. I stayed in Castlebar, that's
143 all I'd say, and I did not like the people that owned it at all whatsoever. And I don't think I learned
144 anything from them anyway, their manner wasn't good for me. But I did take a lesson from it, like
145 how to deal with people, as I said originally. And that was a drapery shop. It was a men's shop, men's
146 clothing, and men's clothing mainly. So that helped me probably to sharpen my mind a bit on what I
147 was doing, you know.

148 Ryan Wellman: It's good to take a different form of learning from an experience like that. Any
149 thoughts on any other memorable moments from your time on the island or in your shop?

150 Kieran Sweeney: I cannot think of anything else. I had been involved and have been involved very
151 deeply in community stuff over the last 25 years. I just resigned from running the hall here in Achill
152 Sound, a community hall that's owned by the public, by the people. I've been at it for over 30 years
153 And I decided at the last AGM in the last week that I've had enough of it and try and get people to
154 get involved in something like that because there's an awful lot of responsibility. It's financially
155 sound, I made sure of that. And you book things in there like activities in the hall. It is a main hall of
156 70 feet by 30, so it's in very good condition. And I'm handing it over to three new people that are
157 running it. I was running it on my own. So there's three people coming in to run it. So it should
158 continue successfully as it had been. So I hope it will.

159 Ryan Wellman: What are some of your favorite moments from working with the community?

160 Kieran Sweeney: I'd say at the beginning, the frustration nowadays to try and get people involved in
161 community stuff that they're not getting paid for. It's not because they're not getting paid that
162 they're not coming in. They just don't want to get involved for whatever reason, which is a very good
163 thing to do when you get satisfaction from doing stuff that you're not getting paid for and that it's
164 helping the community all the time, you know. Hopefully, we'll say that building anyway will
165 continue as it is. It was a very old dance hall back in the 1940s. And I know my father used to show
166 films and I did a very short bit of that with a friend of mine and we showed films, the traditional big
167 real films for a very short period. It was interesting, thinking about it now, I'd forgotten about it. And
168 we'd have whatever the charge was, it was probably two shillings or three shillings then to get in and
169 see it, you know. That's part of my community involvement. I've been on the tourism board. I've
170 been on the development board as well for a number of years that are doing great work in the area
171 that has the aquarium in Keel now and all that work. That's been very professionally run and I was
172 glad to be part of it.

173 Ryan Wellman: So glad to hear. What would you like to see for the future of Achill Island and the
174 future of your shop as well?

175 Kieran Sweeney: The future of the shop I'm supposed to retire and sell it because my family are not
176 interested unfortunately or fortunately for them maybe too sometimes and for Achill Island I would
177 hope that people can still live here because my family of five are all not living in the area, and I just
178 looking at them closely two out of the at least three out of the five could be living here with their
179 qualifications, and they did go to college, some of them. So they would have a job here locally if they
180 decided to stay. And I never sat down with them and said, well, why wouldn't you consider one as a
181 teacher, and why wouldn't you consider working locally here, which is a less stressful environment
182 that's where she's working in London? Especially teaching is a very difficult job in London; would be
183 a lot easier here and less pressure, but I don't know why. Other families are in a similar situation
184 from what I know, that all their families are gone as well out of the area. Now some of them are

185 back in Ireland and some of them are back in Mayo, but the majority of them, if you were counting
186 numbers of people that grew up with my family, I'd say 75% of them are not in the area, which is
187 unfortunate. And the future is the young people, of course.

188 Ryan Wellman: Any other last minute thoughts or any memories that pop into your head?

189 Kieran Sweeney: Not really now, and I have thought about going doing this, and I still haven't
190 thought of anything, let's say, rock moving or anything. There's nothing in my head that I can think
191 of.

192 Ryan Wellman: You were great, it's all right. Everything was great. Well, thank you so much, Kieran, I
193 appreciate it. It was fantastic, yeah, of course.

194 Kieran Sweeney: I know it's all a lot of it about me, but what I was doing, but I'm glad that I can be of
195 some help, and I must listen to the others now. That's what I want to do, just to see what they had.
196 Probably if I listen to them, I'd have got a few ideas of stuff that click in my mind that I should have
197 talked about as well, you know.

198 Ryan Wellman: It was great! Don't worry.