

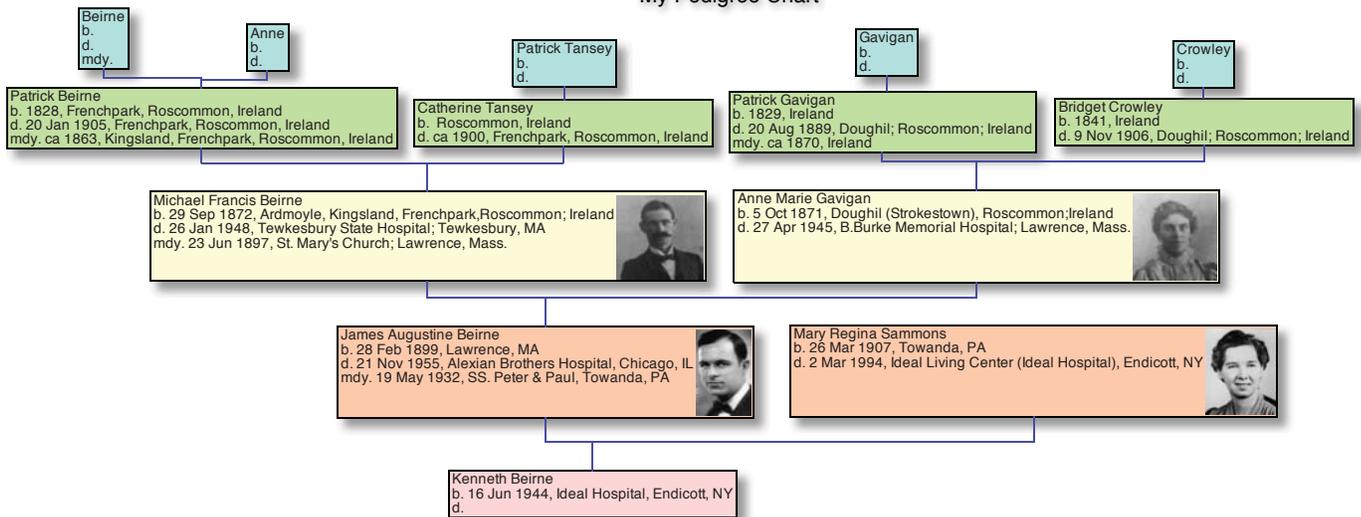
Paternal Ancestry
Beirne, Gavigan, Tansey, Crowley

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This chapter is written less to set the record straight as to just set a record. I never knew some of the people mentioned hereafter, but they had a major impact on me and my life, as well as others.

The Beirne and Gavigan side of my family was always a mystery. Whenever questions were asked, there were no really good answers and we were mostly encouraged to leave well enough alone. Things had happened which seemed too difficult to discuss or share. At least that's how it seemed to me. Perhaps that is why one of my older cousins referred to my father as the "mystery man." I was to learn that our family had a number of "mystery men." They were fathers and mates who simply dropped out and moved away to distant places. Each one has a unique story. It was considered impolite ever to inquire so they were not discussed or mentioned. We were told that we should not let on, inquire or share feelings about them. These were uncomfortable topics so we should "just let them be." "The less said, the better!"

I spent a great portion of my life wondering about my father and his Irish roots and this is their/our story. It is based upon research and the perceptions and inferences of many people whom I have interviewed over many years and my own observations as appropriate. My intent is to provide an accurate story that will inform and serve as a guide for others. This is how it was.....



There are several sets of the Beirne story that are relevant and related. They include the Irish piece where they all originated; Lawrence, MA, where my grandparents and several others settled;

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Endicott where we lived for the most part; Towanda, PA, where my Uncle John and his family resided; and Croton, NY where Gus Beirne (Jim Beirne's first cousin) lived.

My paternal grandparents were Michael Beirne (1872-1948) and Anne Marie Gavigan (1871-1945). Both were born in Ireland within a few miles of one another in County Roscommon. They never met until both were living in America. I never met them or my father, for that matter. However, I was always curious about these people and had inquired many times about them. We were very close to the Sammons & Kelly side of our maternal ancestry and there were many individuals who would add their perspective and answer questions about that portion of our clan, as long as those questions did not include sensitive topics (What other kinds are there!). We never knew much about the Beirne & Gavigan side of the family. This was largely because they lived a great distance away and most were already gone by the time some of us questioners were inquiring about "stuff."

Fortunately, my aunt, Agnes Beirne O'Sullivan (1902-1974), was willing and interested in sharing her story. She came to visit for my brother Joe's wedding in the Fall of 1964. I left college for the weekend to attend the wedding and was able to spend significant time with her at my mother's home. Not only was she willing to answer questions, she was a very direct and outspoken woman who was not afraid to "tell it the way she saw it." She related many stories to me that were based upon her first-hand involvement with people who were then long gone. This information included the names of her parents and other relatives and some of the issues that they confronted over the years. In addition to these, which I have recorded below, she was able to give me the exact Irish location of her father's birth (County Roscommon, Frenchpark, Kingsland, Diocese of Elphin). This proved invaluable when I made my initial trips to Ireland. She and I would continue to dialogue for years.

Aunt Agnes' information proved most useful when I went to Roscommon in 1973 for the first time. I was to learn that the term diocese was a civil term for a parish and rather than the Catholic method of organizing churches. During that visit, a local seannachie named Martin Nash helped a great deal. I had been going house-to-house to talk with people. Nearly all of them were Beirnes which was a real surprise. I had never before experienced such a concentration of people with our last name.

Martin told me that he was a local historian of the oral tradition (a.k.a. seannachie) and offered to help me. He needed to know the names of my grandfather's people. Fortunately, Aunt Agnes had told me what she recalled and that Michael Beirne's parents' names were Beirne and Tansey. He indicated that there was only one area of the county where the Beirnes had married with the Tanseys but it would require that he ride his bike to investigate further. He and I exchanged addresses and we began our work together. Over the years, he sent me many materials in between my trips to Ireland. He did it all for the fabulous sum of five Irish pounds (about \$8US at the time).

As a result of his help, I was able to peruse records in Ballinameen and Frenchpark as well

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as church baptismal records in the Beirnes' local church. In those days, the priests would allow me to handle materials that are now under lock and key. We also visited the cemetery although it was overgrown and no stones were evident for the Beirnes. One of his best inputs was to connect me with my father's first cousin Tom McGarry (1908-1986) who then owned the Beirne property. I traveled to meet Tom and his wife Lizzie in 1977 and spent a day in the old homestead with them. None of this would have been possible if Aunt Agnes had not provided her information.

Their home occupies a small tract (Ardmoyle) near Frenchpark which is a small town south of Boyle. It is thatch-roofed and has its own peat source in front of the house and a garden in the rear. During a trip to the homestead in 1977, Tom and I dug potatoes and cut fresh cabbage in their garden. They had expected me and had some fresh pork. There was no refrigeration so they had walked to the butcher and bought the fresh meat. It was wrapped in heavy paper (for insulation) and then stored in a shady corner of their cottage until I arrived. They had also purchased a supply of Guinness and these bottles were also wrapped and stored in a similar fashion as the pork. Everything was prepared and cooked in the hearth that was fueled with peat bricks from their front yard. It was a wonderful experience to duplicate the experience that my ancestors had felt for over 120 years. (For further information, see note of my visit with Lizzie McGarry).

When I was there, the home was without running water and indoor toilets although there was electricity for lights and some, albeit limited, cooking. A portable privy was located on the side of the house. The Beirnes had one of the best freshwater sources and others would come to use it. The well was still in use in 1977.

The inside was very sparse and had a dirt floor. The entry placed me in the area of the hearth. A small table was available for food preparation and dining later. One room adjoined this area and was the only private room (having a door). Overlooking this area was a loft for the sleeping berths of the children. It made for very tight living conditions! Perhaps this is why they all "bailed out" when they were old enough!

According to Aunt Agnes Beirne O'Sullivan, and confirmed by me, the home is located in the town of Frenchpark, Kingsland, diocese of Elphin, and is recorded in the area known as Ballinameen (also see Irish place names chapter).

On one of my visits to the old homestead in Ireland in 1977, I was introduced to some of the old neighbors by Tom McGarry, my father's first cousin. The Brady family lived nearby in Ardmoyle and one of the daughters, Molly Brady Corrigan, was home from America for a visit. We all went to O'Brien's pub and raised more than a few jars during a long and wet evening. A grand time was had by all attendees!

Molly lived in New Jersey and I have kept in touch with her ever since. I had always believed that there were no relatives still living from my father's generation. During a telephone chat in 1997, she mentioned the McGarrys and told me that one of them (Lillie) was alive and living in London. I contacted another neighbor in Roscommon to obtain Lillie's address. I wrote to her to and then called her to introduce myself. At that time, our kids were leaving to attend a camp in

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CT. Bev and I dropped them off and then drove to Boston where we flew to London so I could meet Lillie and visit with her. She was able to give me a firsthand oral history of her family and anecdotal life stories about the old homestead. We returned to CT to collect Michael and Emily at camp. Lillie and I kept in touch until she died in 2000. (See her story: McGarry & McDermott).