

Introduction and Overview

In My Life

There are places I remember,
All my life, though some have changed,
Some forever, not for better,
Some have gone, and some remain.

All these places have their moments,
With lovers and friends, I still can recall,
Some are dead, and some are living,
In my life I've loved them all.

But, of all these friends and lovers,
There is no one, compares with you,
And these memories lose their meaning,
When I think of love as something new.

Though I know I'll never lose affection,
For people and things that went before,
I know I'll often stop and think about them,
In my life, I've loved you more.

Though I know I'll never lose affection,
For people and things that went before,
I know I'll often stop and think about them,
In my life, I'll love you more.¹

All interpretations of history are incomplete because we don't have the direct experience of the people that we choose to use as examples for the points that we attempt to make or the stories that are passed along. Most of my extended family is unaware of what my mother had to do to survive. My ancestors lived in times when principles and values guided this country and its citizens. Some times were better than others. The interpretation of "which is which" will always be driven by the perspective of the person making the assessment.

1 The Beatles; Rubber Soul Album 1965.

The Best Things Always Disappear

My research has involved travel to cemeteries, churches, and courthouses in the U.S., Spain, Canada, Ireland and England. I have interviewed hundreds of individuals (most are now gone) and reviewed countless letters and notes.

A family history is tough to start. Where does one begin? Who goes first? What will be included or excluded? Given the size of our family, this makes it even more complicated. For example, I have 31 1st cousins on my mother's side and 16 from my father's. When various time frames/eras are included, another level of complexity is added. I will try to organize and frame it in a way that makes the story informative.

My purpose is to record and share the details (who, what, where) of our family and understand what made our ancestors who they were and how each generation influenced the next. The detailed information and stories fall into two categories: objective (who, what, where, when) and subjective (how and why). Some families never have any difficulty in addressing either or both of these categories. However, my immediate family moved so many times, and had so many things that were best left unsaid, that these were never really known by me, my siblings or various other family members. Many preferred to keep it that way! Some still do! To the extent that I am able, I have included stories and history that some wish were left alone. We do have our share of saints and sinners. Mark Twain once said that "A man should be dead before his private foolishnesses are risked in print."¹ I have attempted to honor this sentiment.

It seems appropriate to begin with my grandparents. They are Josephine Kelly and Charles Sammons on my mother's side and Annie Gavigan and Mike Beirne on my father's side. At this time (2005), it seems inconceivable that I could be writing about grandparents who were all born in the nineteenth century. In fact, all were born between 1871 and 1880. Two of them were direct Irish immigrants (Mike Beirne and Annie Gavigan). One was a first generation Irish-American (Josephine Kelly). Consequently, these three were all Irish-Catholics. One was a Protestant of German and Irish extraction (Charlie Sammons), so even he has roots in Ireland. Two of the four had direct experience emigrating from one country to another and then assimilating into this country before 1895. One (Josephine Kelly) had the experience of being assimilated with her parents into this country. All had to find their way in America at a time when the country was seeing numerous changes (1840-1910).

Josephine Kelly was one of 18 children born in 1880 to Daniel Kelly and Mary Leahy. She is first-generation Irish as her father (Daniel Kelly) was born in Ireland. Her mother (Mary Ann Leahy) was born in New York State of Irish parents. My grandmother's Irish roots relate to the Kelly clan who immigrated to the United States between circa 1838 and 1847 from County Cork. Charlie Sammons was the older of two children born to William Henry Sammons and Emma Edith Luther. William Henry had origins in New York State and migrated to Pennsylvania. Edith's roots connect

1 Letter from Mark Twain to Howells in 1908. *The Correspondence of Samuel L. Clemens and William Dean Howells, 1872-1910*, 2 vols. Edited by Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960.

Introduction and Overview

her to Charlemagne and Martin Luther, who was a revolutionary in the Catholic Church before being excommunicated.

Both of my maternal grandparents were born in Pennsylvania in the areas of Overton (Sullivan County) and Overshot (Bradford County). It turns out that Charlie Sammons' father's origins were in New York State along the Hudson River where the Sammons family was well known. Many of Charlie's uncles and aunts also migrated to this area of Pennsylvania.

This story has origins in Ireland where several different families were to grow, emerge, and emigrate from circa 1838-1893. On my mother's side, the Kelly's left Ireland in a few groupings. Some were just before the series of potato famines that plagued that nation in the 1840s. Others followed in 1847 when the "Great Famine" was in its 2nd year. They settled in the Forksville (near Overton) in Sullivan County, PA on the southern end of Bradford County.

The Beirnes emigrated from the old country farm in the early 1890s. Our great-grandfather, Pat Beirne (1828-1905), was a teenager during the famine and managed to survive. Statistically, he would be one in three of the people who survived, remained in Ireland, and purchased his own land. His sons, Michael (my grandfather), Owen and John, and a daughter, Mary, emigrated to America and settled in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Owen died there in 1900. John raised a large family as did Michael in the same vicinity. Mary returned home to Ireland to care for the elderly parents. She married and remained in Ireland until she died. My grandmother Anne Gavigan Beirne was also from Roscommon. She was raised on a farm and became a supervisor and owner of boarding houses in Lawrence, MA.

In Towanda, Pennsylvania, Josephine Kelly and Charlie Sammons raised ten children. Of the ten, six of them would eventually travel to the Triple Cities area of New York State to find work, have families, and spend the rest of their lives. The remaining four were all unmarried. Three entered service to the church. There were two nuns and one priest who cared for his youngest brother Paul in the process.

In a nutshell, my story is as follows: I'm the youngest of five surviving children born to Mary Sammons (1907-1994) and Jim Beirne (1899-1955). Mary was the oldest of ten children born to Josephine Kelly and Charlie Sammons. Jim was the oldest child of four born to Mike Beirne and Annie Gavigan, who were Irish immigrants. Jim was rarely around so Mary raised us on her own. Our family includes many different names. The major ancestral ones include the following. Paternal: Beirne, Tansey, Gavigan & Crowley. Maternal: Sammons, O'Connor, Luther, Kelly & Leahy. There are many more as each married and acquired many other names. The complete database can be viewed at www.beirne.com.

Each of these respective sets of families combined to create the five children who are in my particular family. All of the motivations behind the various moves (from Ireland to Lawrence, Massachusetts, from Ireland to north central Pennsylvania, from the Hudson River valley to north

The Best Things Always Disappear

central Pennsylvania) have their origins in some major historic trends. In Ireland of the 1800s, there was tremendous poverty, multiple famines and a strong desire for freedom and independence. Ireland developed a canal system that contributed to commercial development as early as the mid-1700s. The Irish canal-building expertise and experience emerged as a key resource need as the US sought to use water transport to build commerce and trade from the early to mid-1800s. This was the major factor for the move to North Central Pennsylvania. Later, the railroad industry created employment opportunities that motivated some of our relatives to move to the same areas.

As I reflect upon my two parents and their respective grandparents, all were born in another century except my mother, and that century was not the 1900s, but the 1800s. It's almost unbelievable, as I finish this in the year 2005, that I would have direct roots to people who were born two centuries removed from us today. At the time that they were born, married and had their families, their only method of transportation was walking, horseback, or the possibility of a train. All of the streets at the turn of the century (i.e.1900) were dirt and were often muddy and dusty, which is a sharp contrast to what we have today.

These people migrated at different times and each of those times had its' own historical significance. The Luthers and Sopers went West shortly after the Lewis and Clark expedition and then returned and settled in Pennsylvania by 1816. The Kellys arrived in America and settled in Pennsylvania between circa 1838 and 1846. Some Kellys moved West in the mid 1860s and later. The Beirnes arrived in Massachusetts between 1888 and 1894. Our ancestors lived during the time of the Mexican War, California Gold Rush, Civil War, and Spanish-American War before beginning the 20th century.

This story is really their story. It has several streams of ideas and themes that encompass who they were, what they encountered, how they were motivated, and what they did. Interestingly enough, their behaviors and ideas were formed in another century, but influenced how they raised their children in the 20th century, who, in turn, raised our generation. Therefore, their experiences motivated them and taught them in ways that eventually were transferred to each of us as they raised each of their children, who then influenced their grandchildren. These themes provide a contextual framework for understanding the various and individual family histories and include:

- The 1890s as a transitional decade
- The Irish immigrant experience
- Geographic origins (why Towanda, Pennsylvania and why Lawrence, Massachusetts, why Endicott, New York)
- Ireland from the late 1700s to the early 1900s
- The first quarter of the 20th century when my parents, aunts, and uncles were all born and raised

All four of my grandparents were farmers at different life stages. They experienced the post-Civil War era when the Wild West was becoming civilized, the Indian wars ended, and new

Introduction and Overview

technology was invented and implemented, such as electricity, plumbing (toilets), refrigeration, and transportation. All of them had to "make it" on their own. Two traveled to America to do that. One was the product of divorced parents with little positive interaction with his father afterwards.

A famous Ellis Island motto captures their spirit: "The cowards never came, and the weak died on the way."

Throughout this book there are eclectic references to various historical places, people and events. The appendix has a number of first person stories that have been saved by various families.

**Suffering produces endurance,
Endurance produces character,
And character produces hope.**

-Book of Romans, The Bible

