

MARCH IS IRISH HERITAGE MONTH

The Irish in America

Over the past few years, you have heard comments such as these:

- Why should we care about refugees who are forced into exile by humanitarian and/or political disaster?
- These refugees are poor and disease-ridden who are taking jobs away from Americans.
- They will strain and break our welfare budgets.
- These refugees are bringing crime with them; many of these undesirables are rapists.
- They practice a religion that is alien to America, and they pledge allegiance to a foreign leader.

The above comments are not contemporaneous utterances about the various refugee groups who have recently come to America, rather, they are historical comments about the almost two-million Irish refugees who came to our country in the mid-1800s. And while there had been some Irish who came to America prior to this massive wave of immigration, the roots of most of the emigrants from Ireland can be tracked to this mid-19th century period. So, what caused this massive flight from their native country?

Undoubtedly, you've heard of the great "Potato Famine" in Ireland in the mid to late 1840s. But just how did a blight upon the potato crop become the genesis of the trans-Atlantic journey of millions? Many of the Irish were poor and did not own land. Indeed, British laws greatly restricted the ability of the Irish to own their own land. Rather, it was common that they were tenant farmers on land owned by wealthy British citizens. The produce from their farming efforts were the property of the landowners and not available to the tenant farmers. It was shipped off to foreign ports or major cities on the East Coast of Ireland. Small parcels of the land might be used by the farmers to grow tubers, i.e., potatoes for themselves and their families. Potatoes were packed with nutrition and were easy to grow. It is reported that the Irish consumed about 7 million tons of potatoes a year. Irish author John Keating informs us that "The average adult working male in Ireland consumed a staggering 14 pounds of potatoes per day. The average Irish woman ate 11.2 pounds per day. The potato blight, which wiped out the potato crop in Ireland, eliminated the only source of food for the poor Irish and that blight lasted for years. Diseases such as typhus, dysentery, tuberculosis, and cholera began to spread across Ireland.

As hundreds of thousands of families were literally starving, there were calls for relief and assistance from the British government. As the government began to provide some help, there was public outcry in Britain about using public funds to help these aboriginal people in Ireland. Parliament decided to raise the taxes on the land in Ireland that was owned by British. Taxes were based upon the number of people who lived on their land. To avoid the increased taxes, the solution seemed easy, i.e., get the Irish off the land. Dispossessed and

homeless, starving Irish families had no place to live. Some British landowners sought another alternative to paying taxes, they purchased tickets for ships to take their tenant farmers to America. Decommissioned ships, i.e., ships that used to carry cargo but were deemed no longer seaworthy, were put back into service to carry the Irish to North America. Because of the number of these ships and their passengers that were lost at sea while crossing the turbulent North Atlantic, the fleet became known as “coffin ships.”

The Irish families arrived in many ports in North America, e.g., New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Canadian ports of New Foundland, Nova Scotia, and Montreal. As the poor and wretched arrived in their new countries, there wasn't a warm welcome. A myriad of books and movies address the challenges of the Irish in America in the mid 1800s. The 1992 movie, *Far and Away*, provides an interesting perspective about the immigrant Irish. Succinctly, like many of today's refugees who arrive in America, the Irish immigrants of the 1850s and 60s were not welcome, were mistreated, were taken advantage of, and they struggled to survive. For an informative read about the Irish immigrants in America, consider reading historian Cecil Woodham Smith's *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-49*. The history of Irish Americans reveals great achievements in their new land. But sadly, for some Irish in America, the previously oppressed became the oppressors; a topic to be addressed at another time.

My paternal grandparents hailed from County Kerry on the west coast of Ireland. James and Brigid Kiely came from different towns in Kerry but met here in New York. This St. Patrick's Day I did raise a glass in a toast to Brigid and James whose journeys across the Atlantic resulted in the many blessings that I have known as a citizen of the United States. Sláinte Mhath! (Good health)

Bill Kiley