

St. Patrick's Day Flag Raising Celebration ~ 2024  
ENDURANCE OF THE IRISH  
by Kathleen Jewett Marek

Once again, we are here to celebrate our Irish heritage. We are a people who have forged through countless trials and tribulations. For hundreds of years we lived under Oppressive Imperialistic rule of Great Britain. The Irish were forced to obey strict penal laws. For example: \*We were prohibited from entering most professions, \*owning a home, \*owning a horse, \*practicing our Catholic religion, \*dancing \*and even banned from speaking Gaelic.

Under BRITISH Rule, During the Great Potato Famine in 1845-1852 over a million people starved to death. And those who could afford the passage, fled the island.

It was during the famine, my great grandfather Christopher Deagon was arrested for stealing a few potatoes and put in Dublin's Kilmainham Jail. Upon his release from jail, with no money or food, he moved into Dublin's Poorhouse where the occupants were given barely enough food to survive.

At last, in 1857, 20 year old Christopher Deagon fled Ireland and sailed to America. (I have no idea how he managed to scrape up enough money to pay for this....on the other hand... maybe I don't want to know). After a short time, Christopher met and married Catherine Walsh, who also immigrated from Ireland.

Life in AMERICA often proved to be very difficult for the Irish. Anti Catholic sentiment, along with horrible anti Irish stereotypes infiltrated not only political parties but the cultural landscape as well. Signs reading "Irish need not apply" and "Irish not wanted" seemed to be everywhere!

During this time it was not uncommon for Catholic priests from the North West, to travel to the sea ports of the East coast. The aim was to entice immigrants to move and settle in the West in order to help build up that part of the country.

The HOMESTED ACT, signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862 was a huge incentive as it provided poor newcomers with land for a nominal fee. In order to earn the DEED OF TITLE under the Homestead Act, settlers were required: to improve and farm the land, build a house and live on the land for a minimum of 5 constructive years.

In 1868 My great grandparents, The Deagon's, benefited from the Homestead Act ... they settled in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. In just 5 years they built: a house, a chicken coop, family-garden and a stable (where they even had a horse and a cow). This was quite a contrast from the life they left behind in Ireland.

As the Deagon's continued to enjoy their prosperity here....the same can not be said for the those back in Ireland. Amidst their beauty and poetry lies yet another chapter marked by profound sorrow and division. In 1968, Catholic vs Protestant sectarian violence threatened to implode the entire country of Ireland. (One only has to listen to traditional Irish music to understand just

how painful and problematic the Anglo-Irish relations were). This rampage called THE TROUBLES continued until The 1998 GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT ---which was A Constructive and Respectful Peace Accord. Finally, Ireland's future appeared promising.

You may be thinking, how in the world did the Irish survive so much turmoil? Most Irish will say, it was due to their strong religious faith, their strong family ties, their unique sense of humor (allowing them to laugh, even in the most desperate situations). ---And finally, their music, their poetry, their story telling. It was the “Arts” which gave them hope and solace.

Speaking of the Arts, there are countless Irish standouts: We have:

\*Irish writers: James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, Oscar Wilde.

\*Musical contributions from: Sinéad O'Connor, U2, Ed Sheeran, Galic Storm

\*Actors and actresses such as: Maureen O'Hara, Daniel Day Lewis, and Liam Neeson.

We can go on and on listing famous Irish men and women. However, one only needs to look around this room and see great Irish success: Let us acknowledge our Irish Standouts who we have here today.

We have: \*doctors, \*nurses, \*educators, \*business leaders, \*lawyers,

\*a judge, \*accountants, \*philanthropists etc... We applaud your contributions and service.

Our ancestors would be so proud to see how far we have come, not only as a people but as a country. Currently the Irish economy is enjoying worldwide acclaim as one of the strongest economies in all of Europe. Just this last year, as reported by The United Nations...Department of Human Development... Ireland was rated the second best country in the entire world to live in.

In closing, as we celebrate our Irish heritage, let us salute our ancestors who Paved our way. We are forever grateful! And to YOU my Fellow Irish Americans... You who carry the Irish essence in your hearts...we say ---- SLAINTE!