



## *The Holiday Sideboard*

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My beloved grandmother Kate Whalen, granddaughter of Irish Famine emigrants from County Sligo, was born in 1904 in the Irish neighborhood of downtown Jersey City, New Jersey.

At age 9, she lost her mother Mamie Flannelly Whalen to tuberculosis and her absentee father Patrick passed the care of his 5 children to Irish relatives. At the tender age of 16 she fell in love and married my grandfather and they made a lovely marriage of over 50 years that gave birth to 6 children, 13 grandchildren and several great-grandchildren during Kate's lifetime.

I have heartwarming recollections of holiday meals with aunts, uncles and cousins in the dining room of my grandparents' modest Jersey City apartment where we shared lovingly-prepared food, retelling family stories of days and generations past. (I still delight in looking at the old black-and-white photos of those gatherings at my grandparents' home.) Years later, after my Kate had been lost to Alzheimer's and then to death, I told my mother about my vivid memories of my grandmother decorating her dining room sideboard each Christmas and Easter. My mother told me that the nice traditional dining room table we gathered at and the other matching furnishings in the room were bought second-hand in the late 1940s.

For years after that, I sporadically thought about that sideboard (it had been given to my aunt many, many years ago when my elderly grandparents moved to a smaller apartment). In 2008, my aunt passed away and, at her wake, her children mentioned that our grandmother's old sideboard was in my aunt's garage in a frightful condition. Knowing my intense interest in family history and my 30-year search for my Kate's Irish roots, they wondered if I *might* want it. Was there any question?

When I laid eyes on it, I knew they had not exaggerated in saying it was in a bad way. All the hardware was gone (cord was tied through the hardware holes as "handles") and the top was a nasty collage of scratches, paint can rings and dried crusty spills. My husband tried to convince me to let it go to the curb and a merciful death at the dump. No way. We brought it home and over the following weeks I slowly brought it back: stripping, sanding and restoring the old mahogany to its original rich auburn finish. Searching on-line, I found nearly identical replacement hardware. It now sits in my dining room and a smile comes to my face every time I pass by it. At Christmas, I put out my Kate's dime-store 1940s cast iron skating figures and her "Made in Japan" paper holiday

cottages on top of the treasured sideboard. It helps to soothe my sadness that she will not be at my holiday table as she was for so many years after I married and keeps alive the connection to precious family memories.

