



An Irish Immigrant

One of the most significant people in my life was my grandfather, Denis Ronan. We visited my grandfather's apartment, a home on the top floor of a four story walkup, he shared with my aunt, my mother's sister, in Hoboken. After he retired from Hoboken's Bethlehem ship yards, he would come by bus to my family home in Bayonne every Wednesday. I had the opportunity to observe him, get to know him, and appreciate him over the years.

He was small in stature, about 5'7", but as patriarch of the family, he was a giant presence. I always thought of him as a very wise man, and indeed he was. He was not well educated, probably to about our equivalent of the eighth grade, but he was very bright and an excellent critical thinker. He was a good reader; his apartment was filled with books and he read the newspapers from cover to cover. He followed the news and listened to news commentators. Every Sunday night after dinner, while the women did the dishes, the men would gather around the radio and listen to that generation's equivalent of Fox News, CNN, or MSNBC. I remember us listening to Walter Winchell, Gabriel Heatter, and Father Coughlin on Sunday evenings, along with a variety show, the McNulty's, the only Irish program on the radio at the time. He did not care much for Fr. Coughlin, but since he was one of our own, he deserved our attention. There was much discussion about the news, especially after we entered World War II. As children, we listened in wonder but could never participate.

The culture of the time was a drinking culture and our homes always had a plentiful supply of alcoholic beverages. Drink and food were plentiful on those Sundays but my grandfather was a Pioneer of the Sacred Heart. On rare occasions he would mix a half glass of beer with a half glass of porter, and sip it throughout the night. Arthur Guinness' celebrated dark brown brew had not yet reached the shores of America. I'm sure that alcohol fueled some of the political and social discussions. I do not remember the points of argument, but I do remember the passionate strength of the opinions. It seemed to me that my grandfather started the discussions and then just sat back and listened. At the end of the discussions, he would make his points and usually, half the group would nod in assent. And my Uncle Dan would vocalize the dissent by exclaiming, "*Go away with ya.*"

Life in Ireland

My grandfather was born in 1870 on an island in Roaring Water Bay, Ringaroga, in County Cork. One has to reflect on the fierce independence of Corkonians. It is not called *rebel Cork* for nothing. Great Irishmen were bred in Cork and one of the greatest was Michael Collins, the first President of the Republic.

Denis was one of eight siblings and once they left home, he never saw most of them again. They went off to Australia, New Zealand, South America, and Canada. When I was a child I remember a visit from one of his brothers who settled in California. The brother was a little pompous and a little too conspicuous with his wealth. And the wonder of it all, he was the first relative to fly on an airplane. We were all very excited to hear every detail of that adventure. I can remember my mother saying, "Oh my, I could never. I would be so frightened." This granduncle was pleased as punch to be the center of attention among all his poor relatives. He was dressed to the nines in a three piece blue suit and wore a very exposed gold watch chain. He constantly pulled out the watch because he hadn't yet changed from San Francisco time. For me that was the first experience of different time zones, wonder of it all.

He would only stay in a hotel in New York City. After he returned to San Francisco, we never saw him again. I'm sure that my Aunt Colleen, with whom my grandfather lived, at least sent them a Christmas card with a note every year.

My grandfather's sister lived in the Bronx with her family. Aunt Maggie and her husband, Tom Gargan were wonderful people. We visited each other several times a year. In those days, going to the Bronx was like going on a safari to another country. She had three daughters and a son, Frances, Margaret, and Mary whom we called, Mae, and their brother, Tom. We, as cousins, became pretty close even though they were much older than me.

The three daughters were all school teachers in New York City. I remember, as a child, about eleven or twelve years old, my cousins visited us in Bayonne. The preparations would not have been more elaborate if we were welcoming the Pope. The house was scrubbed from stem to stern, as were we. When they visited, the good china, silverware, Waterford glassware, and Irish linen tablecloths with cloth napkins graced the table. Since they were all school teachers, we had to be skilled with our speech and grammar. We even had new clothes for that occasion. We had to be prepared to discuss the books we read and what we were learning in school. My brothers and I were terrified. Well, the older cousins were absolutely charming, and fun to be with. They would not let my parents dismiss us or relegate us to a dog and pony show. We were an integral part of the entire visit. That was the point where we became friends, and indeed, life long friends. Mae, the last survivor knew and loved my children.



My grandmother died in 1939 when I was two years old. I only know her through photographs, one of which, with my grandfather's, currently hangs in my living room.

It was only after his death in 1955, when I was seventeen years old, that I began to appreciate what a great man my grandfather was. It was in missing him that I began to realize his influence on my life. It was at this point that I began to reflect on how much of a role model he was for me. When I began to visit Ireland, I began to imagine, and maybe experience, something of his life.

Ringaroga is a small island connected to the mainland by a stone bridge about 200 yards long. On the mainland, the road to the left leads to the Town of Skibbereen. To the right it goes for several miles to the Town of Baltimore ending at the Atlantic Ocean. My grandmother, Mary McCarthy, lived in the town of Baltimore. Only seven other families lived on Ringaroga, all named Leonard, but none of them related. My grandfather's family herded sheep, grew hay, but, most of all, they made their living by the sea, as fisherman. My grandfather's house was built on a knoll and from the house you had a commanding view of the bay and the ocean

A little further down, the hill ended in a cliff that dropped off to the beach below. Pop (the name by which all the grandchildren addressed Denis) told me that he would sit on the edge of the cliff and watch with longing the ships coming out of Cobh bound for America. Since there was little opportunity for a future in Ireland, he and Mary started to make plans to start a life in America.

There was a social life among the people of south Cork. I met a gentleman at my cousin Mae's funeral in Florida who told me that he came from Schull, a small town on the peninsula to the west of Ringaroga. He told me about regattas that all the sea towns in the area would have. There was quality of competition and great craic among the competitors. It was possibly at one of these regattas that my grandfather met the girl who would become my grandmother.

Sitting on that same cliff, I had a vision of my grandfather's life as a fisherman, but it was more interesting envisioning him trying to get to Baltimore to visit his girlfriend. When the tide goes out, it goes out for miles. It goes out and comes in very quickly. You do not want to be on the mudflats when the tide turns. The easiest way to visit Baltimore was by sailboat, but you had to know the tides. The second component was being on the water at night. There is no blackness like the darkness on the sea. There was no electricity so there were no lights anywhere. Surely, there was a fireplace in every house but you had to be practically in the house to see any light from it. Going from Ringaroga to Baltimore requires great precision following the stars. If you miss Baltimore, the next stop is Long Island. The same was true going home. You had to be precise to find Ringaroga at night. The good fortune is that if you missed it, you would at least bump into Ireland. You also have to consider that the stars are not visible on most nights in Ireland. The third factor is the wind. There is always wind on the water but you have to know the winds to steer a proper course. It is the miracle of love and persistence and good navigation skills that they married.

Life in America

Denis was twenty-three years old when he left Ireland after travelling to Liverpool, England and from there, sailed for New York. My grandmother left from Cobh two years later. Denis had a friend from Schull, a priest, Fr. John O'Mahoney, who greeted him and helped him get settled. Denis was able to get a job and saved enough money to send for Mary. The two were married with their friend, John O'Mahoney, presiding. They settled on Mott Street in downtown, New York where my mother was born two years later.

The opportunity to help build ships at the shipyards of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation lured the family across the river to Hoboken. My mother and her sister grew up on Jackson Street, attended school at Our Lady of Grace Parish, and finally attended Sacred Heart Academy. The irony is that years later, my son lived on Jackson Street paying a luxury rent only a few blocks from where his grandmother grew up in near poverty. As a family, the Ronans were a recognized presence in Hoboken. My aunt, Colleen (really Kathleen) was active in local politics, president of the Catholic Daughters of America, active as an alumna at Sacred Heart Academy, active in the parish, served on the Board of Directors at St. Mary's Hospital, and had an enviable cadre of friends. My mother married and she and my dad settled in Bayonne where they raised their three children.

The Ronan family crest has the motto, *Fidelis Semper Amicus*, Always a Faithful Friend.

I learned loyalty from my grandfather. It was a characteristic of his life. I knew he loved us. He was always an amiable presence among the Hoboken Irish and many were proud to call him their friend.

I learned about faith from my grandfather. He was a very faithful and loyal Catholic. He was not an all evangelical. He gently set the pace for the rest of us to follow. He was a prayerful man and took time every evening to pray from his prayer books. He took me to many novenas, missions, and days of recollection at Sacred Heart Church.

He was a hard worker and worked several years beyond sixty-five. This was something that we only discovered after he died and we had access to his personal papers. Building ships was not easy work, especially with all the frenetic ship building during World War II.

I admired the courage that it took to leave Ireland and start over to build a new life in America. As grim as a future might have looked in Ireland, Denis lived in an idyllic climate right on the Gulf Stream. He had access to a living as a fisherman with the Atlantic Ocean as a resource. He had the foresight to know, though, that things would not get much better and were more likely to get much worse. Life on an island can get pretty dull for an ambitious and able young man. I credit my own spirit of adventure to my grandfather.

At his wake, in August, 1955, the afternoon was interrupted by the appearance of a young priest, dressed in his cassock complete with a biretta, a strange appearance even for that pre Vatican II era. He put his head back and almost shouted, "Msgr, O'Mahoney is now

approaching.” There was an astonished silence until the appearance of a giant at the entrance to the room. He was fully six feet five inches with shoulders as wide as the doorway, dressed in characteristic monsignor robes with a red cape like Bishop Sheen wore for dramatic effect on TV. He walked with his head down, his hands clasped behind his back, and went straight for the coffin. There were several minutes of dramatic silence after which he declared, “Yes, it is my friend, Denis.” He then delivered a dynamic oration about how the soul of a deceased man is guided by an angel to see and experience everything humanly possible before he ascends to the throne of God. When he finished, he politely greeted everyone in our family and the friendship of almost a century from another time, another continent, and another county was completed and the young priest led him out the door.

My full name is Raymond Denis Ronan Aumack. My eldest son’s name is Denis. We carry the name of a grand and good man and I pray that we measure up to the standards for living that he established. I pray that my entire family is *semper fidelis amicis*

Respectfully submitted:

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