

## Lest we forget

*Oh me name is Paddy Leary, / From a spot called Tipperary, / The hearts of all the girls  
I'm adornin' / But before the break of Mornin', / Faith they'll be all forlornin' / For I'm off to  
Philadelphia in the Mornin'.*

My great great grandparents came to Philadelphia in the 1840's – even as many of our Valley neighbors have come from Michoacan in recent years. In either case our forebears arrived much later than the ancestors of African Americans – who go back to the 1600's and 1700's.

Indeed, regarding my own family tree, it's on record that between 1845 and 1851 750,000 Irish refugees came to America – the earliest in a surge of European immigrants during the subsequent decades up to now. Nearly one out of five of the Irish emigrants died during their sea voyage. My great great grandparents were fortunate. The father came first followed by his wife and 7 children – the wife being later deposited not in Philadelphia but in Halifax, Nova Scotia – due to their ignorance of where was where in America. This meant another boat trip to join her husband.

*With me bundle on me shoulder, / faith, there's no man can be bolder / I'm leaving dare  
old Ireland without warning / For I lately took the  
Notion / for to cross the briny ocean / And I'm off to Philadelphia in the  
Mornin'.*

I can't remember all of the 1958 film *A Night to Remember* – about the sinking of the Titanic. But I'm told one of the Irishmen in steerage entertained his confined compatriots with this song and dance. Nor like many a poor arrival in this country were the Irish welcome in Philadelphia – for being Catholic for example. Within ten years there were 95,458 Irish men and women – the largest single immigrant population in the city. They lived as laborers in foundries, forges, brick works . . . my people worked in the textile mills – or as servants in wealthier quarters. Hostility led to riots (so what else is new?). Convents and churches were attacked; the Irish fought back. There were injuries and deaths. And (can you believe it?) when Irish regiments left town to fight to save the Union (which they did at that famous “angle” at Gettysburg) they underwent a barrage of spit and vegetables – and what do you think of that!

*There's a girl named Kate Malone / sure I'd hope to call me own / To see my  
little cabin floor adornin' / But my heart is sad and weary, / how can she be  
Mrs. Leary / When I'm off to Philadelphia in the Mornin'.*

But it didn't take long for these Irish ancestors by dint of hard work and pride (and some stout and *uisce beatha*) to advance to political roles, even becoming - by many - an aristocracy (to wit Princess Grace). You can't stop time – yet real time has a way of always retaining the old amid the new. Still, unless history is seasoned with something new, it fossilizes into the same old plot over and over again - like perpetual Westerns that after awhile become boring – the fast draw triggering a yawn instead a blank.

**Geoff Wood**