

## *Those Puritanic American Irish!*

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THIS ARTICLE, a close-up of a midwestern Irish community, reviews on that limited basis the opinion that the great-grandfathers of Irishmen in America brought Puritanic attitudes across the Atlantic with them. The time considered is the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Puritanic attitudes might be anticipated in regard to liquor, women and dancing, cards, tobacco and company-keeping. On the rigid side, it must be said that two and three generations ago, children among these Irish had to hide in haylofts to read thrillers; but most children had none to read; and some few mothers kept their houses swept clean of cards and whiskey. In the heyday of Carry Nation, men who never touched the bottle could safely buttonhold heavy-drinking men (it was almost unheard-of that any woman took to liquor), but men resented ex-topers turned into temperance preachers.

"Boy meets girl" was not a matter to frighten parents and grandparents and the priest. Company keeping was relatively casual except for the particular pair; it was private and never made the town council's records. What to do was a personal and at most a family question and generally was more pleasant than troublesome. Basically, there were sides to how boys saw girls. Though boys had respect for girls and would only in rare instances regard them as sex objects, that was only half the story.

Girls were inferior. Everybody knew this and granted it, the issue was not even raised. That was just the way girls were; they were all right, passable and tolerable, even honorable children of God. But they understood that they were below the level of boys, the proud, dominant and ruling class.

By working in the fields, girls did not overcome their inferiority, but accepted it. Boys did not need to say who was superior. The hero in the community, in the church and nation was sure to be a man. It was men who decided things and did things. The notion of woman as helpmate was correct; that was all she could be. It was men who discovered America, fought wars, killed Indians, staked out claims, broke sod, built railroads. Pocahontas was somebody because she was John Rolfe's wife. St. Patrick counted for ten times as much as St. Brigit.

Yet one might ask whether this view was different from that throughout the nation and throughout history. Women were somewhat featured in pioneer life, but man was the pioneer. The frontiersman was a man.

Man's life in this Irish community was hard, and so was woman's. Until after the turn of the century, many women milked cows twice a day seven days a week and fed calves, and day in and day out, all women carried buckets of water. It is difficult to say whether people have more freedom now

than then, but by voting and driving cars and running their share of the town's shops women certainly give the appearance of being somebody in their own right. What has given women distinction in rural life is that, in the house and this side of the barnyard, she has had chores she can do better than man and the fact that, through sympathy and understanding and sometimes merely listening, she has had a hand in running the farm; the kitchen was in part office and workshop. That was and is the situation in and of course beyond any Irish community, and it is a point that is missed in articles on farm life, for instance in *The New York Times* and in national magazines. Woman is very much a partner on a farm.

At sixteen or so, boys began to notice girls and to be self-conscious if they thought they were noticed by them. A year or two later, a boy got to going with the girls and might think of having a girl. Most Irish marriages were delayed until the parties were well into their twenties.

Time moved slowly, and working long hours people had more leisure than they can now command. A summer day or winter evening had an air of almost endless leisure. A family could visit a family for a day or more; floors made good beds. Irish immigrants came out of a land where people could talk to each other and where time did not matter; Ireland and the Irish are still like that. Multiply the pioneer's time-and-space freedom by the Irishman's sense of leisure, and the result was an air of ease. Long hard hours of work, no five-day week, no day off now and then, no fishing trips, "make hay while the sun shines"—all this was the case. Yet boys and girls of courtship age could sit with their elders by the fire on a winter evening and do nothing but talk, make popcorn balls and pull taffy. Until roughly 1910, Irish and other farmers played dominoes and checkers, sat around the kitchen table, a kerosene lamp in the center, and did a sort of communal reading of the county paper and farm journals.

In the 1850's a priest in Iowa advised prospective Irish immigrants: "We are a go-ahead people here." But recent Irish arrivals were not go-ahead. Once a boy was to meet a girl at her Irish-born grandfather's. The man received him kindly and the two visited at the old man's leisure which, thought delightful, began to wear on the boy who asked: "Mr. O'Hagerty, I wonder what time it is?" As if he had never left County Mayo, the host replied: "Oh, I dunno. I suppose it's seven or eight." Was not one hour as good as another? Courting and company-keeping troubled him as little as did the clock.

When the matrimonial gears chugged, the reason was not a bugaboo about sex as evil or marriage as unworthy or too risky. Even if a party was notionate and a hard-looker, a match could be made and people would say, "They're well met, a good thing not to spoil two houses." The reason why stags and maids stood staring at each other was economic: "Don't break up the fortune, keep the land together." By the time a fellow would pry a girl free from that kind of house, the couple would be shaking hands with their dotage. Unity proved weakness and the end of the line.

For many of the Irish parents, it was a joy to see young folks having a good time; they would help provide it and share it. Boys and girls knew they were welcome at certain farm homes, and with only a moderate gap between generations, youths often came to such homes afoot and a-horseback and in rigs assuming they had leave to get up a dance in house or barn. A certain farmer used to waltz with a neighbor woman; everybody cleared the floor for this moment of excellence; and when one of the parishes celebrated its centenary, a dancing couple with great grandchildren on hand were the prize entertainers.

Arthur Young's *Tour of Ireland* (1776-1779) said that the Irish have lively feet. "All the poor, both men and women, learn to dance, and are exceedingly fond of this amusement. A ragged lad without shoes or stockings, has been seen in a mud barn,

leading up a girl in the same trim for a minuet. . . . Dancing . . . is an absolute system of education." Much the same was said in 1844 by Aseneth Nicholson, pure New England Puritan blood in her and no dancing foot under her; in her diary, *The Bible in Ireland*, she recorded that she saw a peg-legged piper holding a child eight months old on the floor to dance; the piper said he did not see how people could get along on a rainy day without doing a jig. People remembered that even on the emigres' fever ships in the 1840's the fiddler's music was better than medicine and that "on the first landing . . . lads and lassies danced . . . jigs and reels and hornpipes."

Many a mother in the midwestern settlement might have said what a village woman in Mayo said to me: "I'd fair and enjoy a good dance myself, and himself would, too, whenever the young people would come to our house." Parish-wide, few taboos were pronounced on dancing; no dancing in Lent, no Sunday dancing and Irish boys and girls were to avoid dancing with "Hoosiers" meaning Protestants, outsiders, inferiors, and were never to dance at the coal mines.

If in olden days the Irish in Ireland feared company-keeping, the fear must have dropped into the Atlantic or frozen out in Ontario or on the Erie Canal. True, a girl up to sixteen should not be seen in her bare feet even when she was pulling cockleburrs. But the more gallant men would keep her reminded that she was "sweet sixteen."

The Hibernian Hall stood on Main Street and there on July 4, 1910 young folks were dancing to conclude the festivities. At the door was the latest new priest, a big handsome man who had only an indirect concern with dancing. Somehow the news arrived that Jack Johnson had licked Jeffries, and the priest, set back almost as much as Jeffries, exploded: "A black man! It's a shame for the white race!" If the priest had dug a little, he would have learned that in 1908, according to the local weekly, "a colored man painted the tower on the church."

At the dance was a girl, pink-faced to begin with and more and more flushed from dancing. Everybody knew that she had "come back for The Fourth," she said that she had "got to dance every set," and some few may recall how in wilted white she danced the Spanish Waltz with a town boy. A few weeks later everybody heard that the girl was dying of "the quick consumption" (lung cancer?). It is said that the Irish in Ireland revel in death and are the only people who talk of a happy death. The day the community got the news, every soul in it would have preferred to have that girl alive and able to enjoy dancing.

If that rural area, then and now comprising three parishes, was un-Puritan in regard to sex, it bypassed Puritanism altogether when it came to consuming liquor. The Irish drank what they could get, when they could get it, and even while they were building their first church in the 1860's, they had whiskey-and-beer breaks, paid for by the parish. But liquor was a problem, and in relation to this problem the local Irish farmers and villagers were typical American pioneers, the volatile Irish celebrating with the majority. Boston and New York Irish also suffered in their persons and families, both in their fortunes and their reputations, from the drink, and pulpits in city and on the prairie begged all hands to abandon John Barleycorn. In *The American Irish* (1882) Bagenot said much in these few words: "Total abstinence is inculcated as the first axiom of prairie life." Born in Ireland and eventually a Sioux City, Iowa reporter, John Brennan had a few years earlier said: "This saloon institution is the crowning curse of our race in America."

The pioneer conviction, far from dead now at least in the Midwest, was that if a man drank, he was a drunkard. Yet in at least this isolated country community, many saw liquor-taking in perspective, could taste liquor or refuse it and could smile when men started to talk big. Mary Ann, one of the first born in the community and living nearly a century in it, was

tolerant of her husband's having a drink at home or a neighbor's or at the parish picnic where the only thing on tap was hard cider. One winter day, he and some neighbors sawing wood, she heard loud talk; her reaction was: "There's more than sawing wood going on down there!"

The town's records show that now and then some Irishman or other was fined one dollar for "disturbing the peace," and we can safely make two bets: that it was liquor that worked him up to this pitch, and that the event was the talk of the town. The village and also the township tried cases before farmer and villager justices of the peace, and on January 26, 1874 an Irishman was charged with "the crime of intoxication and stating that the same" was committed in the village. The non-Irish, invidiously called "Hoosiers," were also haled into court: ". . . allegedly that the crime of breach of Sabbath had been committed . . . and accusing Myron Shingles of the same, for that the said Defendant did on the 24th day of May 1874 engage in a fist fight with one Hiram Plummer." (Pseudonyms.) Early in the twentieth century, two non-Irish kin brothers were stashed away in the cooler one night; Josh in leather boots tried to kick the door down; then lying on the floor he brought the bed to his level and shouted: "We have things coming our way now, Joe." On a subzero night, three villagers, one of them Irish and all acclimatized to liquor, were unable to crawl to shelter, and it was a chore for doctor and druggist and bartender to bring fingers and toes back to normal.

Appreciated by more than one generation was the story that Tom-John, a townsman of Irish antecedents, came one evening into Molly's restaurant for sandwiches to take out; he was in no good way and Molly said she had no ham or cheese. Out he went and in again immediately, slamming the door. "Molly," he said "did we have some words tonight?" "No, Tom-John," said she. "Well," said he, "we're going to have some right now."

Another evening an indomitable Jack, well along for the time of day, was found kneeling in the snow on a neighbor's porch; passing the house, he had heard the family saying the Rosary and dropped on his knees thinking he was at a wake. As he said, "A few Hail Marys couldn't hurt anyone." This same Jack, worried about his father's sickness, sat in the tavern one day when a crony announced: "Jack, your father is dead." The son rushed to his father's bedside, knelt and blest himself. Just then his mother entered: "Jack, what are you doing there—Daddy's not dead." Jack put on his hat and went back to the tavern.

The axiom that if a man drinks, he is a drunkard had much experience behind it in this community and also generally among pioneers. A second well warranted axiom matched it: men drank to get drunk. Down to our day, teetotalers have assumed the gospel truth of both axioms. But whatever about preaching and battle-axing, the problem remained, and Midwestern states have gone through a series of experiments a century long to try to control the taste for liquor. In the village featured where it was against the law in 1875 to "sell or give," a man was accused of "keeping for sale," and another, an unlucky bighearted man, of "giving intoxicating liquor to one C. T. Pigeon." For ten years, the state tried going bone-dry with only blind-pig liquor seeping through; for ten years it tried local option; again no liquor might be shipped from place to place within the state, and during that dry spell, thirsty villagers waited every weekday for an interstate train called "the little Hayner," the name of a cheap whiskey.

In the 'eighties four houses run by Irish were selling in the village, and month by month three men and a war widow stood before officials to plead guilty of selling without a license; each paid a monthly twenty-five dollar fine. The widow was bighearted; once while officers were refreshing themselves at her unlicensed bar, she helped an alleged criminal to a cup of coffee in the kitchen and to escape. The kind

soul had her troubles. Warned about unspecified irregularities, she was at last told she might go free if she quit the town. Forty years later, a druggist's "whiskey license" was revoked, and his wife complained: "The bread is taken out of my children's mouth." Another woman saw the event in a different light, a 1909 entry in her diary saying, "The drug stores lost their permit to sell booze." Even so, five years afterward a blind-pig man went in debt thirteen times in twelve months for something entered as "Med."

Rural neighborhoods had beer-drinkings several times during hot weather, the keg of beer chilled for a day or two in the well. A celebration of this kind attracted even the teetotallers; it was a chance to socialize, and all the men, though no women, wanted to play six-handed euchre. With a couple of beers in him, a man, born in Ireland in 1829, the year of Emancipation, would begin to mutter "t'ousand, t'ousand," something, said his daughter, referring to O'Connell.

By the twentieth century, wakes were celebrated only with coffee and a light repast, talk, and home-grown long-green smoked in clay pipes. But a woman born in 1874 remembered a wake provided with a jigger-boss who, of course, was a bartender.

Early in this century, a new priest arrived with a reputation for youth work, so the local paper said, and work with "those of other religions," just then and there a rare commodity. In this community, as visitors have observed, the priest has always been in a position to lead. Because the population explosion showed little signs of abating, the new priest built "wings" on the

church and then, to the surprise of farmers and villagers, he built a library and peopled it with several hundred volumes. Soon he was talking up a temperance society; the newspaper said his motto was "I am my brother's keeper." Overnight, half a hundred young men were pledged to abstain; boys were asked "to see the folly of the liquor curse," each wore a "button" to show that he belonged and on Sundays they marched to the front pews carrying banners. This was a branch of the Catholic Total Abstinence Union, the latter an offshoot of the movement launched in Ireland and America generations earlier by Father Mathews. The "CTAU" on lapels became as familiar as horses and buggies and fifty years later a red-head was buried with the CTAU button in his lapel.

The temperance young men decided to carry CTAU banners in the Homecoming parade. The Homecoming had become the event of the year surpassing The Fourth itself. The boys marched up the dirt road called Main Street brandishing cups and shouting "Water! Water! Drink Water!" It was as if they had found the panacea for farmers' ills. As they passed the town pump, they ran up for a drink, and women standing by the building whose proprietor's license had been revoked must have thought them on their way to join Carry Nation; they were hoarse, and like tipplers, spilled more than they drank. Even so, the next Sunday the town, again full of teams and people, was quiet, and a boy wearing a CTAU button asked if anyone had seen his father. "Yes, him and another man down by the lower hitchrack, and you can't guess what he was doing." He could and did: "Taking a drink of whiskey."