

Jim's Perspective...

The Irish of Adams County

Several years ago, I wrote an article that involved a story about a lady born in 1829 who eventually lived for many years in Kenesaw, Nebraska. The story of this lady was in a book written by Dorothy Weyer Creigh. The book is titled, *Tales from the Prairie*. This book consists of about 35 separate stories about people and daily life in the Hastings area. It generally involves the years from about 1800 to about the 1940's. One story in the book is titled, *The Irish of Adams County*. I think this is a good day to write a little bit about what Ms. Creigh had to say about the Irish in Adams County!

Even before the American Revolution, the Irish migrated to the new world, and came in such large numbers after the potato famine of the late 1840's in Ireland that by the time of the U.S. Census of 1860, two out of every five Americans were listed as having been born in Ireland. The Irish-born wife of Manuel Lisa, an explorer and fur-trader in Nebraska in the early 1800's, was apparently the first white woman to live in Nebraska. After Nebraska territory was opened to settlement in 1854, a wagon train of Irish settled in what is now Dakota County, near Sioux City. With construction of the railroad through Nebraska, starting in 1864, Irish construction workers arrived in large numbers to work on this railroad line.

Creigh's book does not list exactly the first Irish settlers in Adams County, but it does list one of the earliest known Irishmen to enter Adams County to meet a few other Irish families in Hastings. On February 20, 1874, the Rev. Ferdinand Lechleitner, pastor of the Crete Catholic church, celebrated the first Mass in Hastings at the home of Thomas E. Farrell, an Irishman, and baptized Margaret Neylon, infant daughter of two other Irish immigrants who lived in Hastings.

We have all read about various confrontations and dangerous disputes between fellow Americans today, and developing over the last few years due in part because of the pandemic. But I thought you would be interested to know that, occasionally, Americans have had trouble getting along for many years. Creigh's article about the Irish in Adams County provides an example of this. There was an election in Juniata to determine the county seat of Adams County. Among the Hastings partisans at Juniata was a group described as the "Committee of Toms," five Irishmen named Tom – Farrell, Kernan, Pardue, Murphy, and one other, who were poll watchers assigned to challenge illegal votes (Reminds me of the Voter ID bill in the current Nebraska Legislature!). By noon, their patience was exhausted; they started swinging, and the fight was on. The battle lasted into the night, with cracked heads and bruised knuckles the result. This skirmish was described in a book titled, *Adams County: A Story of the Great Plains*.

St. Cecilia parish was established in 1878. St. Patrick's parish, in Highland township, was organized in 1890. Its membership was 100% Irish. Creigh writes about a few Irish families in particular to give readers a sense of early Irish life in Hastings, Nebraska. In 1875, 25-year-old Bart Kernan and 45-year-old Patrick McKenna came by railroad to Hastings to buy land. Both had come from Ireland about a dozen years earlier and settled in an Irish community in Wisconsin. When they heard of prairie land in Nebraska that could be homesteaded or bought

from the railroad, they traveled to Hastings together, and after choosing their land, they set out on foot to go to Riverton, where the land office was located, which was fifty miles away (Can you imagine walking fifty miles through the Nebraska prairie?). A farmer on a wagon, gave them a ride for ten miles. When they arrived in Riverton, they each bought adjoining quarter sections for \$5 per acre. What a bargain!

Ellen Cecilia Scott, whose mother and baby sister were swept off a bridge during a flood in Marshalltown, Iowa, lived with the John Malone family near Ayr while her father was working on the construction crew of the Burlington railroad. Malone was Mr. Scott's section boss. When Scott moved on with his crew, he left his young daughter behind – and was never heard from again. The Malones brought up the youngster as their own and she was known thereafter as Nellie Malone. She later married Bart Kernan and was the mother of twelve children. The Kernans also took in 14-year-old John Curry. He eventually married Kate Kernan, Nellie and Bart's daughter, and when Kate died in childbirth, Nellie and Bart reared her child, their granddaughter, Helen. Nellie Kernan only went to town twice a year to buy bolts of fabric and all the supplies she needed to keep her family well-clothed. She and her daughters sewed their garments. Their only store-bought clothes were trousers and shoes. At some point, Bart Kernan started a shoe-store, which eventually his grandson operated.

The article does not say when Bart and Nellie passed away. It only concludes by noting that Bart and Nellie Kernan lived to see their dream fulfilled. They were able to give each of their sons 80 acres of farmland.

Handsome Nell

Once I lov'd a bonie lass,
Ay, and I love her still;
And whilst that virtue warms my breast,
I'll love my handsome Nell.

As bonie lasses I hae seen,
And money full as braw;
But, for a modest gracefu' mein,
The like I never saw.

A bonie lass, I will confess,
Is pleasant to the e'e;
But, without some better qualities,
She's no a lass for me.

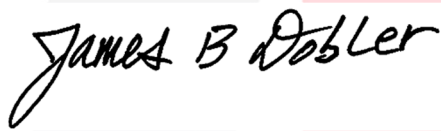
But Nellie's looks are blythe and sweet,
And what is best of a',
Her reputation is complete,
And fair without a flaw.

She dresses aye sae clean and neat,
Both decent and genteel;
And then there's something in her gait
Gars ony dress look weel.

A gaudy dress and gentle air
May slightly touch the heart;
But it's innocence and modesty
That polishes the dart.

Tis this in Nellie pleases me,
Tis this enchants my soul;
For absolutely in my breast
She reigns without control.

Robert Burns, Poet, lyricist and song writer.
Born near Ayr, Scotland, 25th of January, 1759.
He died in his thirty-eighth year.
Published in Harvard Classics, Volume 6, Copyright, 1910, P.F. Collier & Son.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James B Dobler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'J' and 'D'.

Jim Dobler, CPCU

PIA Legislative Coordinator

Questions or Comments? Please email jbdobler@outlook.com