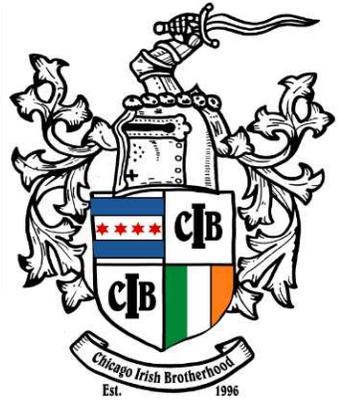


CHICAGO IRISH BROTHERHOOD

Newsletter

SPECIAL EDITION

September 2005



Stairway to Heaven; A Decade Later

In the shadows of metallic and cement monstrosities that clutter the skyline in any great city, you can almost time shattered lives and broken hearts by the incessant ticking of life's pocket watch. And in a frozen, painfully blunt frame of time, this is my family's tragic expense.

Although it was a Sunday ritual for many years, it had nothing to do with packing up the children, standing angelic and humbly genuflecting during the right cue of a church ceremony. The family would, however, load up the trusted and beginning signs of rusted Oldsmobile on mid-afternoon Sundays heading for a visit with "Granny."

In from the 'burbs down I-290 and over to Hubbard and Ogden. We would park across from a now extinct, but Chicago original slaughterhouse and walk in between the creaky and frail three-flats that were erected sometime before 1901. Our destination was the second floor of a rear building that was squeezed onto one lot with a faded replica of itself, standing gimp kneed in front.

Through the East side passageway, in a space allowing single file only, the family could look to the left and see a 40 foot

stairway that uninvitingly ascended.

The wood looked shabby and the structure wobbly under ten layers of soiled grey paint; to a child, intimidating and massive... to an adult, safer to walk around back.

The zigzag stairway in the rear seemed almost twice as old, the wood warped and worn in the middle. It smelled of long years and arduous, unrelenting Chicago weather, a distinct aroma that only wood can acquire through blistering hot summers and ice covered, bone chilled winters.

As a child, these trips were



joyfully anticipated. Visiting "Granny" was the method, but boy there sure were a lot of means.

"The Bamboo Hut,' a candy store front for some shady looking characters playing poker in the back, was a sure thing for a kid

who was locked into "Granny" for at least fifty cents or an even buck. "The Hut" had all the best candy and provided a sugar high that would last until Tuesday afternoon.

Another bonus for the senses was the ever-present need for "Granny" to have a loaf of fresh bread from the Atlas Bakery on Grand Ave. The taste teasing smell clutched your nasal passage two blocks away. Inside, you could see the flame ovens producing the best bread in Chicago and it was the essence of warmth in your hands.

At times the alley, historically a Chicago child's personal playground amidst the garbage cans and garage doors, would be filled with cousins playing tag and tossing a ball around.

Sometimes, the mischievous would have army battles as realistic as possible, using assorted fireworks to dismember plastic tanks and melt soldiers into goo.

Peaceful times would find "Uncle Kenneth" leaning over the shaky wooden rail of the second floor's porch, dropping change to nieces and nephews down below. Somehow, he managed to always have enough for everyone and strategically

scatter the kids so even the little ones could snare their share.

There were quiet, sentimental times when dusk would come and we made sure all of our loved ones were remembered. A bottle of bubbles would be hauled out of the bottom shelf of the Kitchen's dented, tin cabinet and we would blow bubbles to the sky with whispered messages inside for our "Uncle Raymond" in heaven.

At night, while the older kids were off exploring their worlds, I would spend hours playing a mysterious board game that had at least half the pieces missing, but a child's imagination always made a go of it.

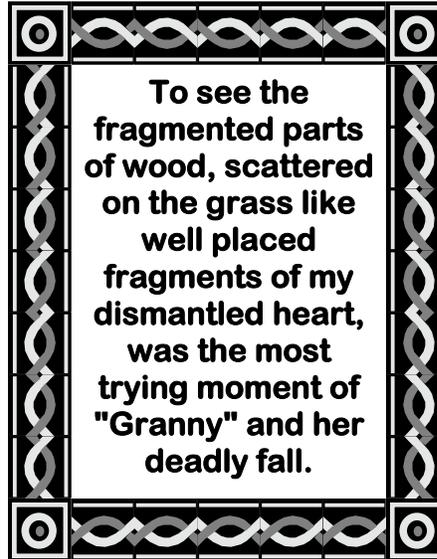
That was decades ago or so it seems, lifetimes ago. And in this world of love, luck, hate, and despair, that childlike imagination has been banished by the cruelties of reality.

On a restless summer's night in August 1995, those wonderful memories of innocence were covered in an impenetrable blanket of emotion covering ice, forever. "Granny," a 91-year-old maternal grandmother of dozens and an iron-willed woman who buried a husband and two sons, crashed through the shabby wooden railing of that godforsaken stairway. She fell to a horrible and unimaginable death.

As a logical adult, the truth is known that a woman in her 90's will not be around to see a five-year-old great-granddaughter be a grandmother. But as the voice calmly explained the happenstance over the telephone it was an unforeseen shock, still unbelievable to this day.

Looking down from the window of the third floor, an even greater shock hit with powerful force and suctioned all the air from my lungs, claiming all my body's energy. I

could feel a sharp seizure of the muscles in the back of my neck.



The end result left me questioning life. I have never questioned death, almost freely accepting that life must end at a certain point and things cannot live for eternity. In order for new life to spawn, old life must be forfeited.

Deaths lead to birth.

My question was the method.

Why, if there is a benevolent God, would this supreme being allow this death to happen in such a hideous manner?

I ask my mind this question with contempt and harden my heart with bitterness. The answer to my question is easy, but not easily accepted. Life is good and life is bad. In order to survive the cruel side of the world, you have to accept that in life you will without doubt meet hardship. A person needs to rely on perseverance, knowledge and faith in life itself.

At her funeral, the priest giving the eulogy remarked about the Irish people and humor. "Granny" could project anger, fear, sarcasm and force, all with a lopsided grin and unique laugh. Humor is a key to life and its survival.

A great example of this truth comes from Irish literature, most recently featured in Thomas Cahill's **How The Irish Saved Civilization; "Belief grew strong that the one thing the Devil cannot bear is ... laughter."**

Standing at stoic attention next to her coffin as the funeral ended, I reverently peeled off the white pallbearer's gloves. I raised two fingers to my lips, pressing firmly against them, then laid them on metal that will hold her for eternity.

As tears welled behind sunglassed eyes and gritted teeth, I knew this was not the final goodbye. I stood sad, but remembered something about her... a whistle.

Her whistle.

It wasn't a song or powerful melodic tone that whimsies music to your ears. It was the strangest damn sound I've ever heard anyone make, but it was her sound. Every time I think of that strange pitch coming from the kitchen as she made tea or baked a ham, I smile.

Sometimes I laugh.

"Granny's" mass card read; **"Anne C. Egan, Born July, 23, 1904. At rest August 29, 1995."**

What it didn't say was; "She'll never be forgotten."

This essay was originally published in the C.I.B. Newsletter of July, 1999.

It is dedicated to those loved ones who've passed, but still remain in our hearts.

August 29, 2005 is the ten year anniversary of my grandmother's death. In the wake of Chicago's porch collapse problems, believe my story first hand, prevention is very easy. It comes down to law and execution.

Currently there are over 200 cases of neglected porches in the Chicago court system.

What will it take to put laws on the books that fix all preventable porch collapses?