

EMIGRATION TO AMERICA – PART I

The Irish have been emigrating to America since the country's early beginnings. The first wave was during the Colonial period of the 17th century. Most of those people were Scotch-Irish Protestants who left because of economic hardships in Ireland. The second wave was the largest, a great exodus of sick and starving Catholics fleeing the horrors of the Irish Potato Famine of the mid-1800s. Each new swell brought Irish immigrants with their own special gifts and own set of needs, hoping to give of their talents and receive aid from their new country. While they were rebuilding their own lives, they built America.

Protestants had arrived in America and settled in Pennsylvania and Virginia. British-imposed economics had been difficult even for them, and they left to find a better, easier life for their families in the more affluent United States. Tough, hardworking, no-nonsense people, they soon became successful, productive citizens of their new country. Soon after the arrival of the Protestants came the Catholics. They settled in Maryland which was a refuge for English Catholics in the 1600s. More persecutions from the British brought another wave of Catholics to America just before the Famine. As many as 40,000 a year were making the ocean trek to America when Ireland was in a state of virtual civil war between the Irish peasants and their British landlords.

Of course, far more Catholics came across by the shipload during the Potato Famine. From 1846 through 1852, between 200,000 and 250,000 Irish left Ireland each year. After that, the amounts increased or decreased depending on Ireland's economy at the time. They reluctantly left when the wolves of poverty, starvation and oppression were howling at their doors. After they landed, life wasn't much better than the one they left. They were crammed into tenements in New York City, Boston and Philadelphia. Some people weren't so lucky. They were living in the damp basements of those tenements and ended up with diseases such as typhus, tuberculosis, cholera, typhoid and dysentery.

Even though at this time the burden of a large family was great, the birth rate among the Irish immigrants was high, as was the number of infant mortalities. Many babies died shortly after birth and countless children never reached the age of five. During the 1850s, the life expectancy for the Irish in Boston was 22 years of age! Philadelphia was a little better, but it also had its areas that were unfit for human habitation, yet served as a "home" to thousands of immigrants. Those who arrived in America already sick had little chance of surviving. Quickly, the weak fell by the wayside and the death toll among them was virtually as high as it had been during the Famine.

The people already in America soon changed their attitudes about welcoming the poor, tired masses and their generosity waned. Before long, it was quite unpopular to be Irish and "No Irish Need Apply" signs hung in the windows of businesses and boarding houses. Segregation was practiced in every walk of daily life and the Irish found themselves on the outside of society.

At that time, outside was a dangerous place to be. It meant you had no job and, therefore, no food, no place to live or any of the other basic necessities of life. It could also prove dangerous if a gang of hoodlums decided you weren't welcome in their hallway or alleyway. Plenty of natives, as well as members of other immigrant minority groups, such as the Italians, decided early on that they didn't like the "Paddys" as they called them (because they thought every male in Ireland was named Patrick). Not that bigotry bothered the Irish all that much. They were accustomed to not being liked. If hatred and discrimination had been fatal, the Irish would have disappeared from the earth long ago. They had fled Ireland to escape the oppression of bigotry from the British Protestants only to find more of the same here in America. The United States was, after all, primarily Protestant, and the natives or well-established, previously immigrated people, harbored much of the same prejudices as in Ireland. The "tired, poor, huddled masses" had been welcomed to their new land, only to be quickly demoted to second-class citizens.



Next month: Part II - The Lads and Lasses Find Their Niche in America



Info from: The Complete Idiot's Guide to Irish History and Culture by Sonja Massie

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October 5, 2004**