

THE MOST INTERESTING IRISHMAN I EVER KNEW

By Anne Sloan

The most interesting Irishman I ever knew could trace his genealogy back to a thirteenth century Spanish king. But the family hailed "of late" from Cresslough County Donegal, Ireland. His college chums and his friends from "the east" nicknamed him "Pat." "The east" being Peoria, Kankakee and Bourbonnais, Illinois, where he was raised and educated. I knew him as far back as I can remember.

I have never known anyone quite like him. To me, he was the personification of Irish gentility, humor, wit, culture and sentimentality. I think that this all stemmed from the deep-seated faith of his ancestors, a faith that was strong and secure, unquestioning, a way of life, with a reverence for all God's creations. He was well educated and highly cultured, but there was an innate knowledge and a sensitivity which made him seem attuned to the muses-music, art, literature and poetry. He imparted to me a special love for these things, especially an interest in music which he helped nurture until it became for me, at a very young age and still is, one of the great joys of my life.

I never really knew how he came to know and love such a vast array of all kinds of music. He somehow sought out special melodies, like some of his favorites: *Meditations from Thais*, *Intermezzo from Cavalleria Rusticana* and *the Lullaby from Jocelyn*, music that I may have never come to know and love without him. And, on the other hand, he could weep at simple Irish ballads. He also had a soft spot in his heart for the music of Spain and Mexico. Maybe there is some substance to the legend of the son of Milesius the Second of Spain who settled in 13th century Ireland and started our clan.

All beautiful things touched his sentimental Irish heart. He had a great love for flowers and plants and seemed to know all their names. He chided me one time for mistaking a little peach tree for a willow. One of his most significant qualities was a phenomenal memory. He could tell you the day, date, year and practically the hour of all the important events in his life, not to mention history. I loved to listen to the storied about his youth, his family and friends, his travels through England, Scotland and Ireland, visiting relatives. Nor was he without stories of his athletic prowess. He was a "fair" pitcher and might have gone on to a career in professional baseball if it were not for a family move to Colorado. One of my favorites (with printed proof in his college yearbook!) tells of the day he pitched for St. Viator's against Notre Dame and held them scoreless. The banner headline proclaims: ST.VIATORS BLANKS THE U-MEN!

He studied German for eight years in high school and college. I believe that he thought it to be one of the most beautiful and expressive languages in the world. But then, of course, he knew but little Gaelic! Father Kelly, one of his college professors, told him it was a terrible shame he was Irish because he spoke such beautiful German. He had a feel for many languages and was hardly even at a loss for the quick translation of any given "foreign" word. I remember that my mother used to smile when I told her that I never remembered asking a reasonable question that he couldn't answer.

He was a hard taskmaster. If he set out to instruct, be it grammar, arithmetic, a card game or driving a car, the pupil had little or no margin for error. I think that he was not really so impatient, but things came so easily for him and his keen mind grasped them so readily, he did not realize that all of us are not so singularly blessed! But once one learned whatever he had to teach, it was learned for good.

He was a gentleman in every sense of the word, even to the classic definition of "*one who never inflicts pain*". I never knew him to deliberately inconvenience anyone. He never "burned any bridges" and he told me many times that this was a very good rule to follow.

He was attuned, through his old Irish faith to the greatness of God and nature and he knew somehow there is a great unifying principle here. One day, as I was indiscriminately stepping on ants, he asked me how I would like to give those little creatures back their lives. That was a lesson I have never forgotten. He taught me many such lessons, some more insignificant, others far more important, but all strung together, his pearls of wisdom constituted a very special way of life.

He was really a quiet, humble introspective man, almost shy at times, but wherever he made his way, he made people happy and they remembered him as someone special.

He was born the first day of October and it seemed always to remain his favorite month. He always remarked about October's bright blue weather, her cloudless skies and Indian summer. Four of his fifteen grandchildren were born in October also. Unfortunately, his eldest granddaughter, at 16, died unexpectedly in October. I have always thought this precipitated his own demise just ten days later. It was just too much for a soft old tired Irish heart to handle.

And so, one of those cerulean October days, his gentle Gaelic spirit slipped its unraveled moorings and made straight for home. Home? To Ireland? No, this time, my dears, to Heaven. Of course, for an Irishman, there's very little difference between the two, you know!

His friends nicknamed him "Pat", my mother called him "Dub". His name was really Francis Joseph Sweeney. I called him Daddy.