



**Irish Jersey** - Laetitia Bernard

**My grandmother was my biggest supporter and best friend until she passed away when I was 4. She was the sweetest person and holds a big place in my heart. When I was very little, my mother and I lived with my grandparents for a little while in West Orange. This photograph I have of her, stays put up in my house. This photo of her as a young girl in New Jersey, in West Orange, has a story behind it. Her father immigrated to the U.S. from Ireland before he met his wife and had her, alongside their two other children. Making it possible for her father to immigrate from Ireland to New Jersey, were push and pull factors. Many events including the Potato Famine, before my great-grandfather came, and World War II, around the time her father came, were push factors. Pull factors included job opportunities, and therefore economic opportunities, as well as the growing number of people coming into New Jersey. It took the Irish time to feel as if they belong, and they did by continuously building a larger Irish population and communities.**

When I was little, my mother and I lived with my grandmother after my mom and dad got divorced. Though I was little when I knew her, I have some quite vivid memories of our time together. She always kept me happy and stayed engaged with me. Our favorite thing to do together was to watch movies, the favorite being Bambi. We would also cook together and she would always make me porridge. What I loved most about her character, was that she always made sure I was happy and comfortable. We had a strong bond that I will never forget. She grew up in New Jersey and then went on to raise my mom and her brother there with my grandfather, in West Orange. I still have a lot of family in Jersey that we often visit, making it and maintaining it to be a special place to me.

My great-grandfather came to America from Ireland to start a life of his own. By the time he arrived, the population of Irish people had already grown to large numbers. Large groups of immigrants began to come to America in the 1840s. The groups were mainly from Germany and Ireland. For the Irish, the main reason to leave was the Potato Famine. "The Potato Famine was one of the darkest times in Irish history. It cut Ireland's population nearly in half from eight million to five million in little under a decade. Nearly 1.5 million perished from hunger and disease, while the other 1.5 million migrated to America, England, or Canada."<sup>1</sup> Though, whether the Potato Famine bring in many people or not, Irish immigration into New Jersey would have still been high because of economic opportunities, of which there were none in Ireland. "Irish men found low-paying work as day laborers or jobs on construction gangs." Mid 1840s and early 50s was a crucial time period in Ireland. For these reasons, the Irish were euphoric about coming to America.

Though America was there for the Irish to start a life in which they could thrive, people of religious affiliations from Ireland, of which there were many, experienced trouble at first adjusting in the U.S. "Many of the Protestants began to worry when these immigrants arrived. 'Their [Protestant-Americans] nineteenth century descendants, schooled in these traditions, viewed the Catholic Church as an alien force that threatened the foundations of religious freedom and democratic order.' Until 1844, Catholics weren't even permitted to run for public office in New Jersey." This was also an issue that affected education for immigrants. Catholics learned about the Protestant views and practices, making them uncomfortable. The immigrants were being rather deprived of their own religion. This illuminates that there was a lack of community in New Jersey as a whole in early time periods of immigration.

As Irish Catholics became more numerous in New Jersey, change was object to such teachings and to the sense of community. Post-World War II saw "a huge influx of Irish to this country. 'It was a massive migration,' said Almeida...Young men who arrived were union laborers and young women worked as domestic staff, for the phone company, or as secretaries."<sup>2</sup> This caused more and more Irish to arrive, therefore creating a larger Irish community. By the early twentieth century, Irish communities in New Jersey were as old as four generations. "They were "deeply layered societies," said Almeida, with working class members through powerful political and church leaders. They "made it easier" for newer arrivals." This, is of much significance. Finally the Irish were able to live in America comfortably and be represented by their fellows. Places such as Paterson, Jersey City and Newark had taken on the nickname of "little Irelands."

With all being said, it can be inferred that by the time my grandfather arrived in New Jersey, his transition was relatively smooth in regards to community values. After he arrived, he

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<sup>1</sup>Nesnay, M. (2004, November 29). Irish-Catholic Immigration to New Jersey . Retrieved from [http://www.marynesnay.com/images/Irish\\_Immigration\\_to\\_New\\_Jersey.pdf](http://www.marynesnay.com/images/Irish_Immigration_to_New_Jersey.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Worth, M. (2011, May 5). The Irish Come to Stay: Immigration to the US, Past and Future. Retrieved from <https://patch.com/new-jersey/southorange/the-irish-come-to-stay-immigration-to-the-us-past-and-future>.

could easily make a family in an environment of the right fit. His children had children of their own in West Orange as well. Ever since, much of my family has continued to live there. "West Orange was formed as a township on April 10, 1863, and was reformed as a town on February 28, 1900."<sup>3</sup> West Orange went through many changes and developments before it became what it is today. Now, it is a "home to more than 500 municipalities, and the vast majority of them are great for families."<sup>4</sup> It was ranked #272 in Essex County rankings, based on school district quality, affordability, crime rates, commute times and other lifestyle into account. Considering the past of West Orange and New Jersey of a whole and its change over time, this ranking is very favorable and shows the beautiful place it has come to be.

By doing this research for my artifact, I've learned so much about the roots of my family that I had never really known about in depth. Now it is clearer to me what experiences my great grandfather had and even those of his parents. I also can now imagine a bit of what life was like for my grandmother, specifically her childhood. She is important to me, so learning about her life and past is as well. Learning about Irish immigration was really interesting because I found out some surprising things. I know now that the movement wasn't really the easiest for the Irish, despite what America was made out to be for them. Learning a bit about West Orange connected with me. I hadn't known that it was ranked as a great place for families, but that statement is now more special to me, as so many members of my family spent their childhoods there, including me at one point. I am glad to have taken a look behind the little information I previously knew, and learn more about life for my family when it began.

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<sup>3</sup> Edwards, M. (2019, March 17). West Orange, NJ Neighborhood Information. Retrieved from <https://www.njmls.com/communities/index.cfm?action=frm.townprint&townname=WESTORANGE&county=ESSEX&a=&areanumber=>.

<sup>4</sup> Kiefer, E. (2016, April 2). NJ's 'Best Towns For Families': West Orange Ranks 272th. Retrieved from <https://patch.com/new-jersey/westorange/njs-best-towns-families-west-orange-ranks-272th>.

