

# STRATEGY FOR IRISH GENEALOGISTS

By Patricia Little Taylor

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From that Irish immigrant who landed in New York with only a little bit of cash and a lot of dreams to a middle class Irish American who is longing to discover his heritage is a long journey. Many of our ancestors wanted to leave the poverty of Ireland and embrace their new life in this country so they gave up many of the traditional ways in order to blend into the fabric of America. Today, as we try to learn about our Irish heritage in order to better learn about ourselves, we are finding out that much has been lost.

As a librarian and genealogist I am jealous of those people who can find everything they ever wanted to know about their ancestors in well documented works. All the genealogy books list the basic steps: talk to relatives, check out the printed sources, and follow up by checking out the local records. It annoyed me that many of the people I was helping were bemoaning that the records of the 1600's and 1700's were lost, and in some cases, I couldn't find any information on my ancestor in 1910. Then I realized that we (Irish American genealogists and historians) would have to do it ourselves.

After we have gathered as much information as possible by interviewing and talking with our relatives, we have to organize the facts, determine what we need to search for and document the facts we discover. The next step in researching our families is to look for compiled local histories and genealogies. Unfortunately, little or no work has been done on the vast bulk of people who arrived after 1845. There may be some local histories on the city, or county in which the family lived and these may be helpful. I have discovered from my research that most of the local histories end just before my family moved there, or cover a different part of the community, or discuss only the families of the founders of the community. The value of these materials is that they provide the researcher with a window to the living conditions, structure of the community and a description of the physical geography of the area.

Some indexes to birth, marriage, and death records have been compiled and there are indexes to most of the federal census records but these are only lists. The researcher will need to go to the actual records. If the family name is fairly common like Kelly or Ryan, then the researcher will need to examine as much data as possible to get a clear picture of the family. You must also make sure it is the person/persons that you are looking for. Trying to list for you all the possibilities would be boring, so I have created a fictional family and will weave a genealogical history from the various threads of their lives.

This fictional family will illustrate the research techniques which we need to develop. In using this story in a classroom situation, it was effective because when someone had a question, I was immediately able to discuss the problem by giving an in-depth description of the resources, the libraries or archives, or other ideas. I have decided to try a slightly different format using the principles of hypertext but without the computer. I will present a paragraph or two and then "window" into the research strategy and then

"window" into a description of the repository. Each section or series of "windows" will begin with "STORY", "STRATEGY", "WHERE-TO-GO" or other notes. Let's get started with the Ryan family.

**STORY**—Elizabeth Ann Ryan was born April 15, 1955 in Newark, N.J., the daughter of John and Ann Ryan. She was baptized at the Church of the Blessed Sacrament in the Bronx. She married Michael Conner Davis in Red Bank, N.J., at St. James parish on November 30, 1979. Michael Davis was born in Troy, N.Y., on August 15, 1950. He was baptized at St. Mary's in Troy. His parents are Charles Davis and Martha Hart.

Mike and Libby have three children and another one on the way. Their children are John Charles, Martha Ann (Marty) and Megan Kathleen.

**STRATEGY**—Libby needs to locate her birth certificate and baptismal certificate. She should also have a copy of the marriage license and church marriage certificate. She should also gather as much information on her husband's family. She will need a copy of Mike's birth and baptismal certificates. She should also have all of the records for her children.

**WHERE-TO-GO**—There is a variety of places in this window.

1. Libby will have to write the New Jersey Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Records, Trenton, N.J. 08625 for copies of her birth and marriage records. She could also go to the Essex County Courthouse in Newark for a copy of the birth certificate but she would have to go to the Monmouth County Hall of Records in Freehold, N.J., for a copy of the marriage record.

2. To get the baptismal and church certificate she should contact the individual churches. Did you notice that she was born in New Jersey but baptized in the Bronx? This is unusual but since her mother was staying in New Jersey with her sister helping to care for the other four children, Libby was born in Newark but baptized in her parent's parish, Blessed Sacrament.

3. For Mike's birth record she will have to write The New York State Department of Vital Statistics, Tower Building, Empire State Plaza, Albany, N.Y. 12237.

4. For Mike's baptismal certificate she will have to contact St. Mary's in Troy.

It is possible that their mothers have some of this information stored in their baby books.

**DON'T FORGET**—Birth and wedding announcements in the local newspaper will give some additional details.

**STORY**—John Patrick Ryan, Libby's father, was born in New York City on October 14, 1920. His parents were Michael Francis Ryan and Sarah Elizabeth Kelly. Libby is not sure where the Ryans lived in New York. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II and married his best friend's sister Ann Margaret Murphy on June 10, 1947. He completed his bachelor's degree and graduated on the G.I. Bill from Manhattan College in 1948, and began to work as an accountant. Annie Murphy was born in Jersey City, N.J. on November 15, 1923. She is still living but not in terrific health. John died suddenly while on vacation in Florida in September of 1984. She and John had five children, Michael Daniel (July 4, 1948), Mary Catherine (October 16, 1949), David George (May 16, 1951), Patrick John (March 17, 1953), Elizabeth Ann (April 15, 1955).

**STRATEGY**—Talking to Anne Ryan, Libby's Mom, can start the ball rolling. Her Mother should be able to tell her the name of the church she was married in, where it was located, and who was in the wedding party. She should also provide some details on her family such as the names of parents and grandparents; if these people are dead, where they are buried; the names of her brothers and sisters and possibly those of her in-laws; and a general idea of her life. She should have some information on her husband's family.

**WHERE-TO-GO**—This information leads the search to several different places.

1. First, Libby will need her Dad's birth certificate. If there isn't a copy in the family papers, she will have to write to New York City, Bureau of Records and Statistics, Department of Health, 125 Worth St., New York City, New York 10013. All births in the City from 1905 to present and death certificates from 1920 to present are at the Health Department.

2. To locate where John's parents lived when he was born, Libby will need to consult NYC directories for 1920. The city directory for 1920 shows several Ryan families living in Brooklyn and gives their street addresses. By checking these listings for a Michael Ryan with wife Sarah and a Mike Ryan who is a bank clerk, Libby gets an address and a possibility of a match. This is secondary evidence but a good start.

3. John's family attended Our Lady of Lourdes. Annie knew this because this is the church her Mother-in-law was buried from. Sarah was buried in the family plot at St. Raymond's Cemetery.

4. Annie and John were married in her home parish of the Church of the Ascension on June 10, 1947. It was a small wedding with Annie's sister Jean as maid of honor; Annie's brother and John's best friend Tom Kelly as best man; a cousin Susan Riley as a bridesmaid; and two of John's Army buddies, George Scott and David Sullivan as the ushers.

5. They moved to the Bronx when he graduated from college and attended Blessed Sacrament. In 1958 the family needed more room and moved to the Jersey Shore.

6. When John died in 1984, he and Annie were on vacation at their condo in Florida. Since his permanent residence was in New Jersey, Libby wrote the New Jersey Department of Vital Records for a death certificate. There was no record for John Patrick Ryan who died on September 9, 1984. Since he died in a Miami hospital, Libby would have to contact either Dade County, Florida or the Florida Department of Vital Statistics in Jacksonville for the death certificate. John's will would be probated in Monmouth County, New Jersey since that was his residence. A copy of the will would be available from the County Hall of Records.

7. Since John is a veteran, his military service file would be available from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri. There is a bronze plaque on John's grave with his rank and dates of service. Annie requested this from the Veteran's Administration when he died.

**DON'T FORGET**—Even though you "know" the information is true, check it out. Memories have a way of losing the details or compressing time so that two events appear to be connected when in reality they could happen months or even years apart.

**HINTS**—If someone is born or died in a hospital, the birth or death record is at the courthouse/town hall of the town in which the hospital is located and listed with Vital Statistics in the same way. The home town would be listed as the place of residence

but not the place where the birth or death occurred. An at home birth or death would be listed as the home town.

**STORY**—John P. Ryan often told his children that his parents came from Ireland. The hometown of the Ryans is still a bit of a mystery. John Patrick was the oldest son of Michael Francis Ryan and Sarah Elizabeth Kelly. Mike was born, according to a cousin of Libby's Dad's, in Co. Mayo. His tombstone lists the date of birth as 1875 and date of death as 1943. John's mother died in 1957 and Annie remembers her having talked about being a bride around World War I. Sarah's tombstone lists her dates as 1896-1957. There were six children in the family but only five married. The names of the children are John Patrick, Dennis Michael, Timothy Joseph, Mary Ellen, Bridget Ann, and Catherine Marie.

**STRATEGY**—We have a good deal of information to research from this section, but we have to stop and look at what we have. We need to look for gaps or the pieces that don't fit well.

**WHERE-TO-GO**—Analyze the information with a critical eye. Create an outline of what you know and what you want to know.

1. One of the first things Libby needs to do is determine the birth order for her Dad's family. John is the oldest son of Mike and Sally Ryan but a little more digging shows us that when John was born, his Father was 45 years old and his mother was 23. By talking to her Aunt Kate, Libby learned that Dennis was actually the oldest child, followed by Mary Ellen, John (her Dad), Tim, Bridget and Kate. This doesn't make sense if John is the oldest son of Mike and Sally Ryan.

2. Since Aunt Kate and Uncle Tim are the only remaining Ryans, Libby called them to see what they remembered about growing up in Brooklyn. They talked about a variety of family matters but really had little new information to offer. They did suggest that Libby contact a cousin Mary Conner and that she might be able to help. Libby did collect the family data about their families while she was visiting them.

3. If John is the oldest son of Mike Ryan and Sally Kelly, then he should not have an older brother or sister but he does. Could Sarah be a second wife of Mike's? The marriage record of Mike and Sally will state the marital status of the couple. Marriage licenses are issued by the City Clerk of the borough in which the Bride resided or the couple was married. But Libby doesn't know this yet.

4. Annie remembered that Sally had talked about being a bride around World War I, which means that she was probably married between 1917 and 1918. So checking with the Brooklyn City Clerk for the marriage of a Sarah Kelly and a Michael Ryan between the years of 1916 and 1919 would work.

5. The marriage license for Mike Ryan and Sally Kelly stated that he was a widower and she a spinster. The date was November 1918. Libby was surprised to learn that the street address for both people was the same but different apartment numbers. It is likely that a widower with small children would remarry soon after the death of his wife. But who was the first wife, how did she die and what children did she and Mike have?

6. Looking for some information Libby attacks the cemetery in which Mike and Sally are buried. She called the office and got the exact location of the plot. When she visited the plot she noticed Mike and Sally's graves but also in the next plot over a Bridget Conner Ryan (1880-1918) and the graves of three children, John (1905-1918), Ann (1907-1918) and Peter (1914-1918). She will take this in-

formation down and will start looking for the death certificates for these people since they are related, somehow. As she is walking around she notices that there is a John Ryan and a Patricia McGrath Ryan about two plots over. There is also a stone for Daniel Ryan (1878-1885). Who is he?

**DON'T FORGET**—People don't want to be buried with strangers and families will tend to be buried in the same range of plots or at least the same cemetery. If you are lucky, then the wife's maiden name will be on the stone. It also helps when the exact birth and death are on the stone rather than just the year.

**STORY**—Libby contacts Mary Conner Walker, her Dad's cousin and a Ryan on her Mother's side by using an old Christmas card list her Mother had. Mary Walker told her that Michael Ryan emigrated to New York with his parents and siblings around 1879 and that her mother, Julia Marie, was the only child born in the United States. Julia Ryan was born in May 1885, married David Conner in 1912 and she died in 1960. Julia had kept a steady correspondence with the family in Ireland. While she was still in good health, she and David went to visit her cousins in the old country. Julia was also aware that much of the family information would be lost if entrusted to the boys. Mary has the letters her Mother received from the cousins and gave a photocopied set to Libby. These letters detail life on the farm in Ballina, Co. Mayo. Besides Mike and Julia there were two other children, Catherine and Peter. Peter married but did not have any children. He died in the influenza epidemic of 1918. Catherine never married and worked to support her Mother until the mother died.

Julia Ryan Conner recorded the births, death and marriages of the family. She kept things such as obituary notices (without dates) and old pictures without names. Luckily her daughter didn't throw them out after her death. In her record Julia stated that her parents were John Ryan and Patricia McGrath of Brooklyn. She had copies of her brother's obituary notice as well as those of her parents. Her father's listed a brother Joseph and a sister Eileen still in Ireland.

**STRATEGY**—When you find a gold mine, dig and document.

**WHERE-TO-START**—A gold mine can be as overwhelming as no information at all, so start in a logical fashion.

1. Remember at the cemetery near Mike and Sally's graves there was the plot of John and Patricia Ryan. This makes sense that a son would be buried near his parents. Libby had copied down the dates for John Ryan (April 11, 1854–May 25, 1913) and Patricia McGrath Ryan (December 25, 1855–June 17, 1919). Since the death certificates for New York City are at the Municipal Archives, 31 Chambers Street, Libby can check the microfilm and order a copy of the death records. Julia's birth record will also be at the Municipal Archives. She should also get Daniel's death certificate.

2. Since the Ryan's emigrated before the 1880 census, Libby should now go to either a public library or the National Archives Record Center in Bayonne to check census and immigration records. The three census schedules which are open and should be checked are 1880, 1900 and 1910. The 1890 was destroyed except for the Veterans schedules for the states K-W. The 1880 and 1900 have a soundex which will help locate a specific head of a household. The 1910 has a soundex for only those states which do not have vital record information. If the searcher has an address, then

it is possible to try to locate the information without much difficulty.

**HINT**—The soundex is a coded index where each consonant is given a numerical value and each vowel is ignored. So it doesn't matter if the name is Peters, Peterson, Petersen or Paterson, they each have the same value in the soundex P-362. The 1880 soundex is only for those households with children under the age of 10 so in our case the Ryan family should appear. The 1900 soundex is for all households. In the 1900 record there is some additional information that is very helpful since the census asks how many years the immigrant had lived in the United States, and it also asked all married women how long they had been married and how many children they had and how many were living.

3. Checking the 1910 census Libby located Michael and his first wife Bridget Ryan in Brooklyn. They had 3 children, John 5 years, Ann 3 years, and Dennis 2 months. They were married 6 years and Bridget had 3 children and all living. Mike had been living in the U.S. for 31 years and was a citizen. They rented an apartment. Looking at the census record of the building, Libby notices a Kelly family living at the same street address but in 37A. The Kelly family lists Patrick Kelly age 56 and Mary Ellen, his wife, age 48 both born in Ireland. Children listed were Susan age 17, George age 15, Sarah age 14, and Tim age 9. Pat and Mary Ellen Kelly had lived in the U.S. for 20 years and he was a citizen. He worked as a police officer. Mary Ellen was married 19 years and had 6 children of whom 4 were living. Also living in the household was Ann O'Brien age 74, born in Ireland, listed as mother-in-law, married 50 years and had 5 children with 3 still living. This is the second reference to Sally Kelly's family and the process of searching for her family's records will follow the same basic procedure.

4. Working backwards check the 1900 and 1880 census records. Look for other members of the family who may live nearby.

5. Check the passenger arrival lists for the year in which the family arrived. *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index* may be able to help but mostly it is done by reading microfilm and trying to piece the story together from other records.

**STORY**—When Sarah Kelly Ryan was living, she wrote down what she remembered of the Kelly family history. Like many family stories the information is undocumented. Sarah wrote that her Dad Patrick Kelly came from Co. Kerry near Tralee. He met and married her mother Mary in New York in 1890. Mary O'Brien Kelly was from Co. Cork according to family legend. They were supposed to have met on the boat coming over. Her father Patrick was traveling with his brother Dennis and sister Mary. Dennis died in the Spanish American War and Mary Kelly entered a convent at age 18. Sister Mary was a teacher and died at the age of 70 in 1940.

**STRATEGY**—While the Kelly family is less documented, there are still a number of ways to check it out.

**WHERE-TO-GO**—The same search for birth and death certificates using the same type of search strategies can be done.

1. Since Dennis Kelly died in the Spanish American War (1898), there should be a record of his military service in the National Archives. The service record would list next-of-kin and a general description of Dennis. It should also give place of birth. Also check the local newspapers. These soldiers were considered heroes and may have a write-up in the paper.

2. If Mary Kelly became a nun, try to locate the order she entered. She probably entered a local order's Mother house and since it was a teaching order that might help. When a woman professes her vows, she must list her full name, both parents names including mother's maiden name, her age. The parish where she was baptized is often listed.

3. Since the Kellys arrived around 1890, the first census record that will list them is the 1900 Federal Census.

**STRATEGY**—Repeat the steps for researching the Ryan family and begin with the Kellys. Then do Ann Murphy Ryan's side of the family. Often we can combine some of the research trips and search the census records for everyone but try to separate each family otherwise you can get terribly confused and they become one big blob of people.

**FINALLY**—Document every location and every record you find. There is nothing more frustrating than to have part of the answer and not remember where you located the record. If you make a copy of a record from a book, list the full title or copy the title page and verso, the library where you found it and the call number of the book. Then if you need more information from that source, you can send a complete request to the library. If you are getting copies of letters from a relative, note who owns the original, their address and any restrictions regarding use of the information for publication in a book or article. When using public records make complete notes of the source such as county, type of record, volume, page and line. Don't forget to add the dates involved such as 1880-1881 Court Records of Manhattan, volume 3, page 99, line 6. Be as exact as possible. It will save you time later.

I realize that I have not discussed what to do, or how to use the records in Ireland but covering about 100 years is enough for one article. Next issue I will devote to searching in Ireland and the nuances of researching its many repositories.

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# Bulletin Board

The **NEW YORK COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES** has announced an intensive week-long History Teacher Institute to be held at Wells College this summer. The topic is "The Historian's Craft: Immigration and Multi-Culturalism in American History" and will provide an opportunity for teachers to work closely with nationally renowned scholars to improve their knowledge of the subject and their teaching skills. Approximately 150 teachers will be accepted; all successful applicants will be awarded full scholarships to cover tuition, room, board, and travel expenses. Graduate credit will be available through Empire State College. For further information, call the Council at (212) 233-1131.

Congratulations to NYIHR member **JOE DOYLE** who was recently awarded a grant of \$5,200 by the New York Council for the Humanities for a three-part series of public conferences on the history and experiences of New York maritime workers from 1930-1960. "A Conversation of Learned Hands" brought together scholars and representatives of the trade to discuss such issues as craft specialization, unionization, ethnic history, and occupational folklore.

The **BROOKLYN HISTORY MUSEUM** at the Brooklyn Historical Society, 128 Pierrepont Street, opened in October 1989. It contains a permanent exhibit devoted to the history, people, and cultures of Brooklyn.

**SOURCES FOR IRISH GENEALOGY IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE MORMAN LIBRARY**, *A Research Guide* by James T. Small is available for \$7.50 from Irish Books and Graphics, 90 West Broadway, N.Y., N.Y. 10007. Dr. Small drew up this guidebook for his lecture to the Roundtable on 24 October 1988. He has very kindly allowed us to make copies of it, proceeds from the sale of which will help to underwrite some of the Roundtable's research projects. The guide reflects Dr. Small's experience and familiarity with the genealogy collections of the Morman Library in Salt Lake City which are available on microfilm throughout the country.

The **NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH** will be held on 11-16 June 1990 at the National Archives in Washington, DC. The program takes a records-intensive look at Federal records of genealogical value located in the National Archives in Washington. Enrollment is limited. For information write to the National Institute on Genealogical Research, P.O. Box 14274, Washington, DC 20044-4274.

The **LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM** has mounted an exhibit on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 entitled "Out of the Ashes." The factory was located just east of Washington Square and employed mostly young Jewish women as operatives. The exhibit will run through June 8th, Tuesday to Thursday, 11 am-4 pm at 97 Orchard Street, New York. For more information on the museum's activities, call (212) 431-0233.

Dr. Robert Snyder (Ph.D. History, New York University) is researching social changes in the *Washington Heights* and *Inwood* areas since the 1940s. He would like to interview Irish and Irish-American people who lived or worked in these neighborhoods, past or present. He is interested in insights, memories, fears, perceptions. Contact him at: Gannett Center, Columbia University, 2950 Broadway, New York, New York 10027. Tel. (212) 280-8392.