

# A WEST SIDE STORY OF A SORT: The Teevan and Byrnes Families

By Richard F. Teevan

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My forebears decision to emigrate destined them for urban living. These, as well as my associative families, entered the swirl of America in their desire to create a new life. As with the songs<sup>1</sup>, they eventually "tripped the light fantastic on the Sidewalks of New York" and ranged "from High Bridge to Bay Ridge" for at least 190 years.

My immediate branch started with the arrival of 'Sean Athair' Bernard Teevan, age 24,<sup>2</sup> on the S.S. Furnessa in August of 1884. This information was found by researching the unindexed Ship Manifest Lists for the Port of New York recorded on microfilm and issued by the National Archives of the United States. This discovery was made recently after a long search at the facilities of the Long Island Room Division of the Queens Borough Public Library and it was discovered appropriately on "Ellis Island Day" (9/10/90) though historically Bernard Teevan had to come through Castle Garden.

The Ship's Manifest disclosed that Bernard Teevan (b. 1859/60) had his last residence at Lanark, Scotland. Our family all agree that he stated he was born in County Cavan; other historical facts confirm this, but at this time to point to the exact location requires continued investigation. This second stage immigration from the Port of Glasgow was accompanied by a "Spinster" Margaret Teevan and a Teevan family of five including a set of twins. This group was dispersed within three separate steerages aboard the ship.<sup>3</sup> The first tracing of Bernard Teevan was found in Trow's "New York City Directory" in May 1885; the fact that he "surfaced" in an "official" record within the first year of his arrival surprised me inasmuch as he was a laborer listed at a "Hell's Kitchen" address (443 West 33rd Street).

Between this date and the early 1900's, Bernard Teevan married Catherine Leavy (Westmeath)<sup>4</sup> and had at least eight children, of whom five survived until maturity (Catherine, Bernard, John, James and Susan). My father, John, was baptized at the Paulist Father's church at Ninth Avenue and 60th Street. Bernard Teevan by then had been a brakeman, switchman, and foreman. My supposition is that he had worked as a "Navy" on the Scottish Railways and this was why he was able to establish himself so quickly. In the period 1890-1896 he moved uptown to the "200" addresses of 67th Street. . . "Out to the Dakotas." The Ninth and the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railways were by then operating with parallel tracks on the West Side, under the name of the Metropolitan Elevated Railway Company. The nearest stop to the Teevans was at 66th Street.

This area was the developing "suburbs" of the upper West Side. This space had been the Dutch settlement called Bloemendael (Bloomingdale: "Vale of Flowers"). This was a new area of row houses with affluent houses and institutions not far away. The New York Central and Hudson Railroad yards, with a substantial grain elevator, was between the row houses and the Hudson River. Broadway, then called the Boulevard (also known as Bloomingdale Road and/or Albany Post Road) crossed over

Amsterdam Avenue (10th) at this point; it did have a planting of trees. Central Park was being developed to the East, but on 11th, or West End Avenue, where there were no railway tracks, it was "still a wasteland of asylums, athletic fields, breweries, grain elevators, rocky promontories, swamps and slaughterhouses."<sup>5</sup>

By 1897 Bernard Teevan had returned to a 50th Street address even though by subsequent immigration his sister Bridget (b. 1872), his brother Michael (b. 1874), the Coughlins, the Reillys, and the Lordens (his sister Mary), the whole merry intertwined crew, had settled on 60th Street. In many of the talks between my mother Florence and my father John, there arose the expression "San Juan Hill"; this phrase translates into a definition of an area between 59th and 64th Streets and Amsterdam Avenue that was populated by poor Blacks. This period reflected violent escapades between the Blacks and the Irish; there was similar interplay between the Puerto Ricans and the Irish in a later era.

My maternal Grandfather, John Byrne(s) (b. 1867, d. circa 1926-27) whose pre-emigration residency was "Drohcadee", in the County or the Diocese of Armagh, has not been traceable. (With respect to his surname, family tradition has it that Immigration "s-"ed him!). We currently surmise that he came through Ellis Island. At present the earliest record of him is the birth certificate of his daughter (my Aunt) Theresa Byrnes born on April 16, 1897. This document shows my Grandmother's name Bridget "Delia" Martin (b. 1874, d. 1908). My mother, Florence, still tries to remember a "ditty" that is called "Delia Went Up To Dublin" which possibly indicates that is where her mother was born or emigrated. Theresa Byrnes' birth certificate shows that they lived at 309 West 42nd Street which was east of Holy Cross Church (331 West 42nd Street). The location of this tenement is now an empty parking lot.

Shortly, this corner of 42nd and 9th Avenue was to be the hub of the clanking and squealing street railway lines of the "42nd Street, Manhattanville and St. Nicholas Avenue Railway Company" and the "Third Avenue Railway Company." The Ninth Avenue Elevated (which was started as the "West Side and Yonkers Patent Railway Company") screeched into the 42nd Street station. The bustle and crescendo of progress was penetrating into the life of the tenements of the Irish.

The Byrnes remained in Hell's Kitchen. My mother Florence was born there in 1901; her older sister Anna was born about 1899.<sup>6</sup> The Byrnes girls' mother died in 1908. The family's trans-block movements placed their residences from Holy Cross Parish (42nd Street), to St. Michael's Parish (34th Street) and then to Sacred Heart Parish (51st Street). Some cousins still remain in this parish, no doubt with many a story of the longshoremen (the Gleasons, the Flynns), the theater, the politics and the Westies.

The facts of life in this area were family struggles to survive (one neighborhood fixture was the soup kitchen).<sup>7</sup> Then there was Irish Tammany politics, the docks, the railroads, the trolley barns and the toughs. My Grandfather Teevan was "tough", but apparently Grandfather Byrnes was "gentle" . . . their families survived! Both Grandfathers ended up as "single parents" (losing their wives without remarriage). Meals were served at the Teevan's by the daughters when the father sat down at his table; if the boys missed the meals the girls were not expected "to be put upon;" the boys were to fend for themselves. At the Byrnes, until the

girls were old enough, the father provided the meals and he returned each day to check up on them during the recess from school. Young John Teevan went as far as the sixth grade and then presumably entered the work force. My mother Florence Byrnes went to school until eighth grade. She was only employed "two days of her life" with Gimbels.

Then there was "the Code." For example, my father's tenement was burglarized; he went to talk to "one of his friends about the matter." Most of what was stolen was returned; apparently he was not part of the criminal element but they were part of his growing up. He was part of the "Indian Head Social Club;" he was apparently at some point involved with boxing; and "he hung around the trolley barns." Recently I asked my mother to confirm my recollection about these trolley storage and repair shops and she agreed that they were at 53rd Street & 10th Avenue; she then mentioned that at one time she lived across from same; most of the lines were electrified or cable, but she stated she remembered seeing a "horse trolley" coming down 10th Avenue.<sup>8</sup>



"Hanging out at the Trolley Barns." John Michael Teevan (far left), circa 1910.

Where was the Irish in their lives? It appears it can not be described in terms of traditional music, dancing or County Associations. My mother went to dances where the tradition of the "Grand March" was the main attraction. Grandpa Byrnes (died circa 1926) played John McCormack records (with Fritz Kreisler on the violin) while his cat sat upon his shoulder. Bernard Philip Teevan (Sean Athair's son) also had a large collection of 78rpm McCormack records in the 1940s. My father, John, was part of the 165th Infantry (the 69th) during World War I. His relationship with Father Duffy, Chaplain of the 69th, continued after his return home. Father Duffy signed the transcript of my mother's baptism at Holy Cross in preparation for her marriage to my father; they met the Father in his constant walks up and down 9th and 10th Avenues while my mother was "giving some fresh air" to her new son (John Michael) or at the "Paddy's Market on 9th."

Grandfather Teevan was a member of the Ancient Order of

Hibernians; he purchased "Irish Revolutionary Bonds" with the U.S. Army pay allotment checks his son John was sending home from France. ("Never a pence reappeared!") My mother, my sister, and myself danced the "jig" in the living room in St. Albans, Queens; the music came from the Radiola. Tea at home was in cups; my mother always had two. . . , but at her sisters' "it t'was large bowls of tea," and somehow that was two also. My father and my Uncle George always went to Irish Wakes and always returned with the story that the corpse was placed into the corner and one of the mourners occupied the casket; I have seen similar stories in folklore books.

But they were Americans! My Uncle Bernard and my father (the Boss and the Laborer) were employed at the Merchant's Refrigerating Co. (between 10th and 11th Avenues on 17th Street) during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. The then "new Irish" worked there also and many an argument ensued between the views of the "old Irish-American" and the "new Irish" (shades of the 1980s). I learned which group was talking to them by the names by which they were addressed: Ben / Barney / Bernard and Jack / Jock / John.

But these "Americans" remained staunchly anti-British. "The Montreal," the British ship that transported the 69th to Europe during World War I "was as filthy as the English." The "Canadians" next door in St. Albans could always light a fire under my mother, etc.!

My father, John, was very active in veteran organizations, with visits to mental and other hospitals and meetings at the Lost Battalion Hall, Queens. In the free-standing closet in my father's room were many pictures (now lost?) of Hell's Kitchen and post-World War I military funerals with caissons, flags from the tenements, crowds and people looking down from the windows. When President Kennedy was shot John Teevan took out one of these "old coffin flags." The American!!

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "When New York Was Irish," Terence Winch; "Sidewalks of New York," Charles Lawlor & James Blake (1894)
- <sup>2</sup> "Sean Athair": Grandfather in Irish: In compiling my Teevan family history I used "Sean Athair Bernard" as the "tag" for the umbrella to classify members of our branch of the family. (Brochure: "Fragmented Spirals-The Teevan Leabhar" 1988, 1989, 1990; Selected geographical free distribution initially; selected redistributions of supplements; also free.)
- <sup>3</sup> Ship Manifest 8/26/1884: Michael Teevan, the head of the family arriving with Bernard Teevan, must have been a cousin as you will note Bernard's brother Michael was only 10 years of age in 1884. The brother is listed in the 1900 Census as living with Bernard's sister Bridget Teevan Coughlin. One of the children, Daniel Teevan, was found by another researcher (whom I had previously helped) in the 1900 Census as living in Paterson, New Jersey with a Murphey family. This opened a possibility of a more direct relationship to a Professor Richard Collier Teevan in Albany, New York. His father was a Daniel. The professor taught my cousin's son John at SUNY.
- <sup>4</sup> Catherine Leavy Teevan: She died in 1913 when my father was 17; he had a younger brother and sister. The records vary as to her age which causes uncertainty in reading other documents showing her name such as Ship Manifest Lists and the Morman Family Library microfiche information for Ireland. If I accept one of the suppositions with respect to dates her parents were Nicholas and Honore Leavy. Bernard Teevan: He died in 1925. Also in the Morman Family Library records there is a Bernard Teevan and a Bessie Brady having a son Andrew in Ballyhaise, Ireland in 1864.
- <sup>5</sup> Quotations and other information: *West of Fifth: The Upper West Side* by James Trager (Atheneum, 1987); *You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan* by Jeff Kisseloff (Schocken Books, 1989)
- <sup>6</sup> My requests to the Board of Health for post-1898 Birth Certificates were not successful; I was told that the Board of Health reversed an earlier decision to place Birth Certificates in The Municipal Archives up to 1909.
- <sup>7</sup> Soup Kitchens: It would seem the Byrnes/Teevan families were able to survive without this service. My Father in his "story collection" was always able to "rile" up my Mother by trotting out stories such as: "The Soup Kitchen", "The Blind Man", "Tugboat Annie", "Grandpa Byrnes Bathtub Gin" and etc.
- <sup>8</sup> Electric Railroaders Association, Inc.: The Queens Borough Public Library, Long Island Division, has sets of bound publications of their Bulletins. They are a wealth of information on Subways, Elevateds, Trolleys and Buses.