

No America for Me! Going to New York in 1906

BY NORA O'CONNOR STINE

FOREWORD BY BILL GEOGHAN

My great-aunt, Nora O'Connor Stine, left Ireland for New York early in a new century. In 1947, encouraged by her American born children, she committed the remembrances of her life to paper. What resulted is a charming memoir of her life from County Cork to New York and, ultimately, to the Irish Hills of Michigan.

Nora was born in 1886 in Bantry, County Cork, to Ellen and Michael O'Connor, a retired British Army soldier who served twenty-one years in India. Her father died in a tragic accident leaving her mother widowed with six children, Nora being the fifth with the oldest, Jeremiah, eleven and Dennis, the youngest, barely two.

Life in Bantry revolved around the "Big House," the estate of the Earl of Bantry which overlooked the bay and dominated the

town. Young Nora was taken there by her mother to be interviewed by the young Lady Leigh-White for the position of third housemaid. After her mother and sister made her uniforms, off she went to live in the great mansion.

Her memoir recounts her awe at the stiff regimentation of her first staff dinner with the English butler at the table's head and the Scottish head housekeeper to the right. Everyone was aligned in rank around the table. At first she was embarrassed at having to wear her uniform to Mass back in town, but Nora quickly realized what a status symbol it really was! She soon grew to like Bantry House, and recollects in detail the huge mansion (more than fifty rooms), the secret passageways and the ghost stories told by the other serving people.

So, when her younger brother Dennis

asked her if she wanted to go to America with him, she replied "No, no America for me." But fate intervened and at her mother's request she reluctantly agreed to accompany her brother to America to join her brother and two sisters who were living in New York City.

Nora's memoir was given to me by Mary Lou Stine Nelson, the youngest of Nora's children, and is published with her approval, as edited and transcribed from the original hand-written document by Maryellen McGarry. What follows is an excerpt from Nora's memoir, focusing on her trip and days in New York in the new century.

B.G.

(Note: This excerpt preserves the style and spelling used in the memoir. For clarification, footnotes and sub-headings have been occasionally added.)

Nora O'Connor Stine was born in Ireland in the mid-1880s. Two decades later, she emigrated and landed in New York City, just six years after the new century had begun.

Bill Geoghan is a Roundtable member. Three of his grandparents came to New York at the start of the twentieth century from Bantry in Cork and Carrick-on-Shannon in Leitrim. His last contribution to New York Irish History described growing up on the streets of Park Slope.

Maryellen McGarry, a former computer professional, has been involved in researching her family history for the past 15 years. She has conducted seminars on the joys and tribulations of Irish genealogical research and is a great believer in "writing the story."

Photo: Nora O'Connor Stine

From the first of May to the 17th I spent at home visiting old friends and schoolmates, packing things for our journey across the Ocean and trying to cheer the lonely hearts we were leaving behind, some of whom we would never see again in this world. I mean our darling grandmother and Aunt Mag. Tears were in their eyes every day. After the evening devotion at the church Dennis and Janie, Jim (my beau) and I wandered through the countryside which is beautiful at that time of year in Ireland. With the furze in blossom it seemed like the hedges are built of gold. We four made great plans for the future then. I was to come back soon. I remember the very last evening Jim and I walked together. We had reached the Brittius mine and on turning back a lark flew past us

and soared high, high up in the sky singing like mad! We stood and watched it fly out of sight.

In the morning we were to leave, I said to Jim "I shall never forget that lark."

A Band assembled at our gate giving us a farewell concert. They played "Come Back to Erin" and all the old Irish tunes and quite a crowd of friends were there to bid us God Speed. It was wonderful, but kind of sad, too. Dennis and I had to sing "just one more for the old crowd" which we did. I think if I remember right the songs were "Danny Boy" and the new one "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree."

Our poor Mammie! didn't sleep much that night. I could hear her several times saying the rosary to herself for her beloved "twins" who were leaving in the morning. It was Dennis' going that hurt her most, he was her pride and joy and I do believe it broke her heart. Mother often said "she



was never the same." Mother and my sister Margaret and my Aunt Mag felt pretty bad too. By morning when we had to catch the 10 o'clock train to Cork, we were all feeling so heartsick that not much breakfast was eaten.

In those days when someone went to America, the whole family went to the depot or station with them and in my childhood I had witnessed many a sad scene when a friend left for the U.S.A. With heartbreaking sobs, it was just like putting a dear one in their grave and in fact it was just that as some of those boys and girls never saw their parents again.

Mammie could hardly let us go. She was the worst with her blue eyes streaming with tears. Jim Hazel came to the house in the morning and his father met us as we walked across the Square to the train. Jim Hazel had said his goodbyes to me the night before but there were tears in his eyes when he kissed me at the station. The station was full of our friends bidding us God Speed. They hardly ever say goodbye in Ireland, it's always "Godspeed" or "God be with you." ...Mammie kissed and kissed me and her last words were "God be with you Agellee, I'll pray for you. Take care of yourself now." We got our seats on the train and we were still waving our handkerchiefs and throwing kisses till they were out of sight!

I imagine the folks at home spent a bad day the 17th of May 1906. They little knew how close they were to having us back with them that evening. We had to change trains at Cork and catch the train to the port of Queenstown. There were several boarding houses right by the pier that we were to leave from and De and I were assigned to one. After a pretty slim supper around six that evening we went walking. There was a Catholic Cathedral a few blocks away. We stood leaning on its wall overlooking Queenstown Harbor. The Steamer Teutonic, (the sister ship of the Titanic that was to go down in 1912), was anchored in the harbor. "Look De" I said, "there she is, that's the Teutonic, our boat." He looked at me and said "Gee Norrie I wonder what the bunch is doing at home tonight?" After a moment of silence he blurted out "Let's take the next train home. We can sell our tickets to someone." I knew he meant every word. I said "Do you really mean it?" "Sure" he said, "we're young yet." ²

My heart was beating. Sure that we'd find someone to take our tickets and we could go home. Home, that seemed so far away even then. When we spoke to some older people back at the boarding house, they informed us that our luggage was already aboard and it was too late to change our minds. De said "Guess it's no use. Anyway Mother would be so mad as she wanted us to go to America."

About 10:30 I said goodnight to him, as he was assigned to a room with some other young fellows and I with some girls from another country. We were called early next morning to get ready to be taken to the boat via a small steamer. A few Irish musicians came with us, playing and singing old Irish tunes. As the ship left the harbor De and I stood watching the last glimpses of our dear land fade away in the distance.

SEA SICK, HOME SICK

When I went below to my berth I felt like a lost sheep since Dennis and I had separate accommodations again. We would meet after each meal and walk around the deck together. I finally got acquainted with two very nice girls from County Mayo, Mae McGann who was with her father and Maggie Finnigan.

The five of us, De and I and Mr. McGann and the girls got along nicely. Mae's father took us all under his wing. When we were a few days out someone came up with an accordion which was just what De wanted. He played and we sang which brought the 2nd and 1st class passengers to their rail and they enjoyed it by shouting "More, more!" We danced a lot on the trip as long as the weather was fine.

It wasn't long before old man sea sickness hit us one after the other. First one and then another would heave to the side and part of our insides would go to the fishes. An Englishman by the name of Frank Keller took a shine to me and was very kind and full of sympathy. He had a small bottle of brandy which he passed around but couldn't get me to touch it as I said it burned my lips. Frank and De sang together too, so that's why he attached himself to Our Crowd.

It was while we were all so sick that the big storm hit us. Everybody was ordered to their

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Photo: The town of Bantry as it looked around the turn of the century. The railroad station in the foreground is probably where Nora and Dennis boarded the 10 o'clock train that took them to the city of Cork. Courtesy of William Geoghan.



berths. I myself was passing through the worst of my spell of seasickness. The men's steward on board shouted an order "No one on deck." The ship was tossing badly and you slid across the floor only to be tossed back again. Most of the women and girls went to their berths but not me. I was deadly sick and knew I was going to die anyway. I wanted Dennie, but no men were allowed in the women's section. So I told myself if I'm to die I want the wind in my face. I knew I was white as a sheet. I tottered from my berth and made the companionway. I climbed it some way to the open deck and the wind felt good. Waves that were mountains high were smashing the deck. Everything was tied or bolted down. I wasn't supposed to be on deck, not a soul in sight. I saw a box and a big coil of rope go overboard. The ship heaved on her side and I grasped an iron bar which was fastened across a door. Just as I did a wave broke over me. The door behind me opened and a sailor came out. I was sliding with the wave when he caught me and hung onto the iron bar himself. "My God," he shouted "what are you doing here?" He was a middle-aged man and when he managed to get me inside the stairway again I looked like a drowned rat. He had oilskins on and he called a steward to take care of me and said if he hadn't come through that door then I'd have been washed overboard. The news spread through the ship and there was a great to do. De heard of it and

forced his way into our berth saying "that's my little sister and you can't keep me out."

The stewardess put me to bed between wool blankets and took my clothes to be dried but I was all over my seasickness by morning.

Finally, the storm blew itself out, the sun shone again and once more we were allowed on deck. We passed some very large icebergs on our way. They looked like white shiny

castles sticking high up out of the water and once we saw a large whale or two spouting water like a fountain. Once in a while a gull or two would come flying over. I often wondered if they followed the steamers way across the ocean!

The days passed and one evening the Steward told us "be up early" as we'd be sighting land. In the morning, sure enough, way off in the distance we saw a faint line in the ocean. Everybody was excited. This was America and we had been nine days coming.

De and I watched that faint line get clearer and clearer till finally we were here. The Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island where they landed at that time stood out clearly in sight. A few days before everybody had been vaccinated and we had very sore arms but had lots of fun with them, too, trying to keep one another from bumping them on our walks around the deck.

OPEN YOUR EYES, IT'S ELLIS ISLAND

We had to stay on the boat one more night I guess for an inspection or something. We were landed at Ellis Island the next morning. De and I stuck together like glue wondering what would happen now. We were questioned by this one and that one till I nearly got mad at them. They almost took the eyes out of me poking and looking at them so often. I remember that I told one doctor "if you pull back my eyelid one more time I'll hit you!" He only laughed at me and asked what kind of rouge I used which also

made me mad as I didn't know what he was talking about.

They finally let us go but we had to stay there till our names were called. A Catholic priest finally gathered us under his wing. The boys were separated from us by then and I had to give Dennie half of the money I had. He took one suitcase and I the other. The boys were turned loose to look out for themselves, but the priest took all the Catholic girls. Ferries were running constantly between Ellis Island and New York and someone told me that De had gone on alone which nearly got me crazy—as I knew he didn't know where to go although he had Jerry's³ address and also Uncle Johnny's.⁴

I sat there for what seemed a very long time. Names were being constantly called and one by one a girl or lady left the table. Finally, "Nora O'Connor," that's me! I jumped up and grabbed my belongings and followed the officer. He put me in a kind of large cage. My God, I thought, what's going to happen to me now? I realized soon that the best looking man I ever saw was smiling at me through the bars. "Jerry, Jerry," I cried. The man in uniform didn't take that for granted. He questioned me and said "Do you recognize this man?" I said "Why sure, that's my brother." He questioned Jerry a little and then let me out. Jerry put his arms around me and kissed me and said "Gee, Sis, how you have grown! Quite a young lady, eh." He asked me where Dennis was. I said someone told me he had gone on. Jerry said you stay right here and don't move till I come back. He searched everywhere but no Dennis, so we left the island.

The ferry docked and the people streamed off and lo and behold, there stood poor De on the pier, watching and waiting for me. Poor kid, he sure was in a state and was awfully glad to see us. He said some shabby man had approached him and asked him to go with him but he knew better. That's why he waited for me, thinking the man would kidnap me, I'm sure!

JERRY'S PLACE—YORKVILLE

Jerry took us right to his home on 90th Street off Second Avenue. We rode on the elevated trains. My sisters, Nellie and Mary were at Jerry's waiting to welcome us. Mary Ellen, Jer's wife had prepared a wonderful dinner. I

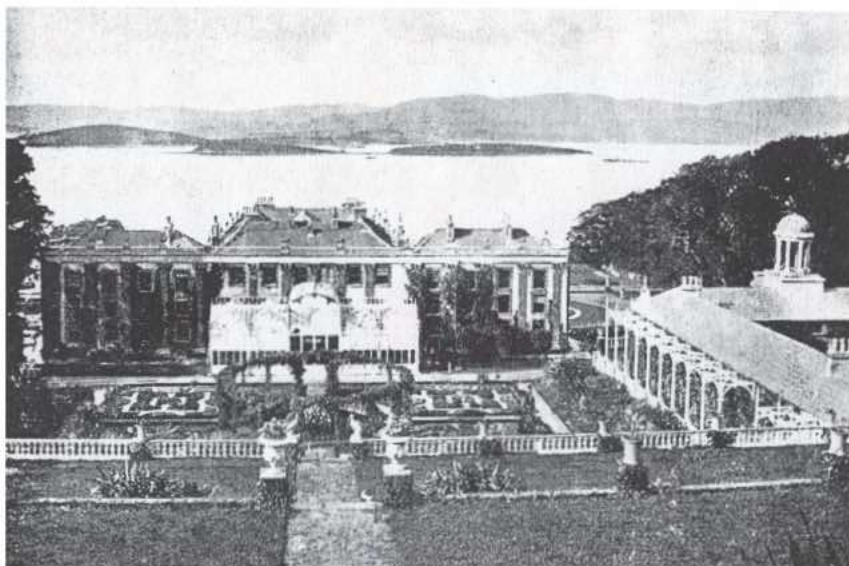
remember it was just like home, ham and cabbage and it sure tasted good to De and me after the meals served us since we left home. There were the usual questions, as to how the folks at home were and Jerry sang his favorite song for us, "When you were sweet sixteen."

I had never met Jerry's wife, Mary Ellen⁵, although she too came from our part of Ireland and Jer had kept company with her at home. She was very nice, fair and good looking, but not well at the time as she was expecting her first child. She sure was nice to us—taking us into her house.

The next evening after Jerry got home from work and supper was over, Jerry and Mary Ellen took us to see our Uncle John and family. They lived on East 88th Street, a few blocks from Jerry. His wife, Auntie, as we called her, was a smart, trim woman. We were called green horns and Auntie had a parrot who could talk quite plain. It got to know our steps when we came to see them, which was quite often and would croak "Here are the green horns⁶, Auntie!" It never called us anything else either while it lived. Auntie finally had to keep the thing covered when we were there as it always scolded us. Auntie said it was only jealous, but I hated it.

A few days after our arrival Jerry took De shopping and when I saw my little brother again I hardly knew him, all dressed up in his jaunty clothes, hat, suit and tie. De told a funny story. They had stopped at the corner of Second Avenue at a shoe shine stand. Jerry sat up in one

Photo: A view of Bantry House and Bantry Bay c.1900. Parts of the House are operated today to provide bed-and-breakfast accommodations. The estate is still owned by the Leigh-White family. A copy of Nora's memoir was left with them in 1998. Courtesy of William Geoghan.



chair and motioned De to sit in the other. In telling it to me De said "Gosh, I thought that it was another elevator or something, so I waited for the thing to move. When the colored man started to polish my shoes I said to myself, huh, Jer doesn't even clean his own shoes! What a country!" I laughed and laughed, but he warned me to tell no one as they'd call him worse then a green horn. Jerry got a job for De at the place where he worked. All alone, I soon began to get home sick. I couldn't eat or sleep, thinking of home and wanting to be back there

NO WORK FOR A LADIES' MAID

I had excellent references from Mrs. Leigh-White⁷ but they didn't seem to matter much here and I couldn't get anything to do in my line of work. Mary, my sister, came and took me to the Employment Agency where she got her job and she introduced me to the lady that ran it on 35th Street. I learned to ride the street cars and elevated trains and I would sit at the agency with other girls waiting to be called to a job. Week after week went by and my heart was breaking to go home to the family. Sometimes I'd walk all the way home to either Auntie's place or Jerry's with the news "No luck today." I didn't like America. The heat was bad by this time and those awful thunderstorms really put terror into my heart. I wasn't used to them and I cringed at every streak of lightening. Mary Ellen did her best to cheer me up.

Finally in June, my sister Mary came to Jerry's and said a friend of hers, a cook for a family by the name of Runkle told her the family was going to the Adirondack Mountains. They had a summer place there and wanted a kitchen girl to help the cook. What a come down from what I had been trained to do! I consented to go since it was only for the summer months, anyway or maybe till October. I would be paid \$16 a month, imagine! Mary took me to see the lady one evening and the day the family finally left for the mountains she took me to Grand Central Station and I went by train with the rest of the help.

We arrived at the Saranac Inn in the morning, had breakfast there and then a large launch took us up Saranac Lake to the Runkles camp. My heart began to lighten a little, as it remind-

ed me of home with the blue lake water bordered with beautiful fir and spruce trees. We were met at the dock by two elderly men, guides they called them. They had been guides for the Runkles family for years. The camp consisted

of several cabins with one large main house that had a lounging room, a dining room and kitchen. The cook and I had a cabin to ourselves as did the laundress and waitress. It was beautiful there and I enjoyed every moment of it. There was a boat for the use of the help and we sure used it in the evenings when our work was done. Moonlight nights we'd go out on the water and sing. Soon I got to know the girls who worked at other camps along the lake, and we visited and played cards. There were men servants too so it wasn't a hen party by any means! Mr. Runckle had a launch of his own and a man to run it, besides his boats and canoes. The cook at Runckles was Swedish, around 40 and very jolly. Her name was Lilly and I liked her very much. We used to laugh a lot during our work and she'd always help me so we'd finish our chores at the same time.

I spent a wonderful summer and the days weren't really long enough. The woods were all in their glory in September when I had a letter from Jerry telling me he and Mary Ellen had a little daughter born on the 20th. He said that they had named her Eileen and what did I think of that for a good old Irish name! When we left in October, my job ended and then I had to look for another. To tell the truth I hated to leave Saranac Lake and I vowed someday I'd go back again.

I went back to my brother Jerry's again to stay until I could find a job for the Winter season. The Society folks had already hired all their help as they had all come back to the city before we did. Everyday I reported at the office and sat around with the rest of the applicants from 9 till 4. Several weeks went by and no job for me. Many a day I walked home from there all the way to 90th Street, not because I didn't have the nickel for carfare but because I was lonely and discouraged and I wanted to be with people. I'd stop and window shop. I'd stop in at Aunties on 88th Street and she always gave me encouragement.

SAVED AGAIN BY JERRY

Finally I got a job as a kitchen maid in a swank place on Fifth Avenue. The family's name was La Cheir, which was french I guess. I had to go interview with the lady of course to find out if I would suit her. I was shown in to her sitting room. She finally arrived clad in a beautiful negligee trimmed with fur and she had a poodle under her arm. She told me what she wanted me to do and the wages I would receive. I had all the passages leading to the kitchen, the laundry and the help's dining room to scrub every morning. Besides that, I was to help the cook and the assistant cook and do the help's dishes. It was some job. They entertained a lot and we were kept quite busy. I took the job and my wages were 20 dollars a month. I worked awful hard there and as the kitchen and laundry were one floor underground I soon began to lose my complexion. Jerry noticed it and stopped in one night on his way home from work to look the place over. Right away he said "you're quitting this job, it's no place for you". The rest of the help all seemed to be afraid of the lady of the house. She had a habit of making a tour of the house to inspect it. No one ever knew when she'd come. Only her maid would let us know before hand if she had a chance. The poodle would always be under her arm. There were 7 of us to do for 2 people. They had a butler and a footman but it was the kitchen people that caught the worst, of course. I finally took Jerry's advice and left the place and went home, as we called Jerry's place.

I spent the next summer in the beautiful Adirondacks again, this time as a laundress. I ran the mail launch, there too, just for fun. I had lots of fun up there that summer, too. When I came back to New York City in October, I met Bob Sullivan from home. We kind of tagged along together all that Winter—danced a lot and went places together and had a good time.

A MILITARY MAID

In the spring I got a job at West Point with a Captain and Mrs. Marshall which suited me fine. They liked me very much and as it took me out of the city again, Bob and I lost touch. I

enjoyed myself at West Point very much—so many nice Cadets and soldier boys. It was wonderful there. Mrs. Marshall was very particular who I went with. We had the usual Hops (dances) on Saturday night and Effie, the other girl and I went to every one of them. Effie was much older than I, around 30 I believe and had a little girl around 8 or 9. Her husband was serving in the Philippine Islands. Her mother was caring for the little girl and lived in Highland Falls, a small town at the gates of the post.

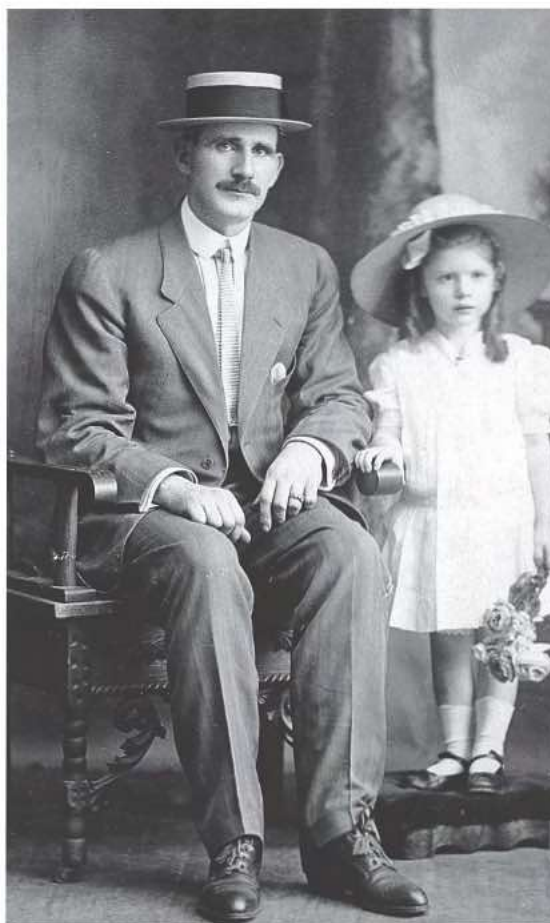


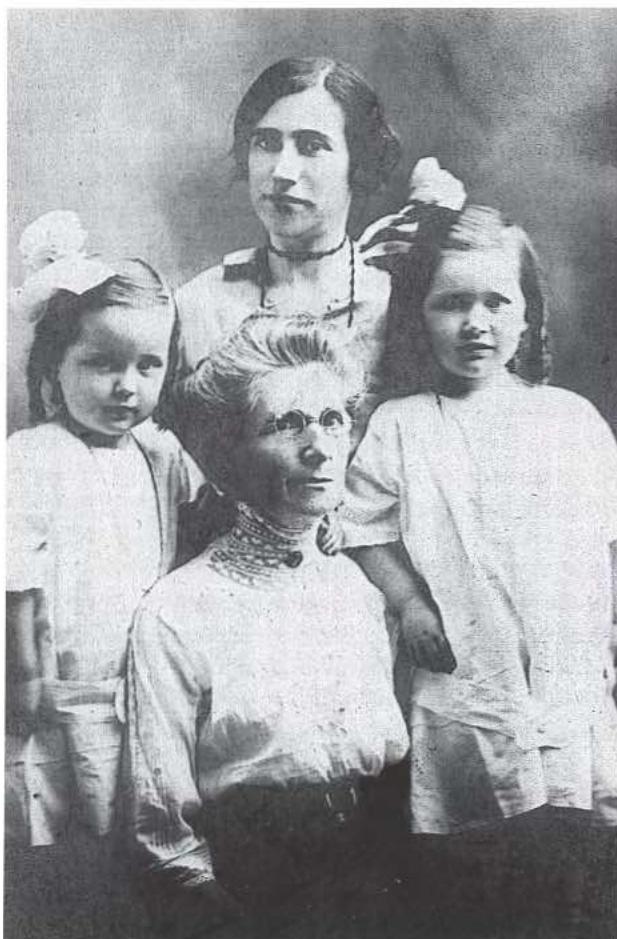
Photo: Jeremiah O'Connor, Nora's older brother, with his daughter Eileen O'Connor c. 1910. Courtesy of William Geoghan.

I wasn't with Captain Marshall for very long when he got orders to go to Fort Ethan Allen, Vermont. We spent a winter up there which we didn't enjoy very much. There was an awful lot of snow that winter. Sunday afternoons I'd dress warm and plow through it all around the post. It was fun when you have a beau with you and I usually ran into some soldier I knew who liked to see me home. We had our Saturday night Hops there too and Effie and I went to dances in the towns surrounding the post. Some of the

Barracks were closed there as the regiments were in the Philippine Islands. Even so, there were plenty of fellows to dance with.

When spring came Captain Marshall was again ordered to move—this time to Fort Sheridan⁸. Mrs. Marshall gave us two weeks vacation so I visited the folks in New York City. Effie and I arrived together at Fort Sheridan one dark night. The lights at the depot were out and no one was meeting us (as we thought). Effie began to blow up like mad, cussed a little too, if I remember right. When out of the darkness, a voice said “Never mind girls, I’m here to take you home.” It was no one else but handsome Captain Marshall himself. Was Effie’s face red! He took us to the house and the first thing I heard when I went to my room was the most beautiful Taps I had ever heard. I have never forgotten it all these years later.

Photo: Nora O'Connor Stine in 1914. Nora is at top center. Her mother, Ellen Sullivan O'Connor, is at bottom center. Nora's daughters, Eileen and Marguerite, are at the sides. Courtesy of William Geoghan



AFTERWORD

While working for Captain Marshall and his family, Nora met a soldier, Jim Stine. When he finished his tour of duty, she left her position with the Captain and went to Jim’s home state of Michigan to marry and raise their family. Initially, life was difficult for them and when Nora was expecting her first child, news arrived from the “folks” in New York that her mother was on her way from Bantry to New York to Michigan. Ellen Sullivan O’Connor with all her children gone (and her mother and sister dead) finally left Ireland. Nora’s sister, Mary, also left New York and moved to Michigan, where she too married and raised her family. Nora, Mary and their mother are all buried near each other, far from Bantry Bay, in the Irish Hills of Michigan. Nora had five children and many grandchildren, but never returned to the beloved land of her birth.

Nora was my great-aunt. Jerry, her oldest brother who helped to bring them all over, was my grandfather. The baby that was born to Jerry and Mary Ellen McCarthy in 1906 was my mother, Eileen O’Connor Geoghan.

B.G.

Notes

- 1 Nora’s maternal Grandmother Sullivan.
- 2 Dennis was seventeen and Nora was eighteen.
- 3 The brother of Nora and Dennis.
- 4 John Sullivan, brother of Nora’s mother, Ellen.
- 5 McCarthy was her maiden name.
- 6 A term used to denote newcomers to America.
- 7 The lady of Bantry House where Nora had worked before coming to America.
- 8 In Illinois, just north of Chicago on Lake Michigan.