

# Employment for Women & The Irish Immigrant Girls Home (Part II)

BY JOHN T. RIDGE



*Ed. Note: This article continues one by John Ridge that appeared in volume 14 of New York Irish History.*

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF FATHER RIORDAN  
After four years of exhausting labor the beloved founder and first rector of the Irish Immigrant Girls Home, Father John J. Riordan, passed away in 1887. He had been so strongly identified with the home that it was hard for many to conceive of another person in his place. His successor, Father Hugh Kelly, because of ill health, was forced to resign after only a short time, and Father Michael O'Callaghan, a native of County Cavan, then took over the home.

A major change in the history of immigration in the Port of New York took place at the end of 1890. Control over the landing immigrants passed from state to federal control, a welcome response after years of corruption at

the old state run center at Castle Garden. The change from state to federal had little effect on the home beyond causing a slight increase in the financial outlay of the mission, but physically the reception center was moved two miles out in the harbor to Ellis Island.<sup>1</sup>

Father O'Callaghan's term of office was a very busy one. During 1890, for example, 3,809 girls were received at the home and of this number about one third were obliged because of some unresolved problem to stay there anywhere from one to several days. The institution took pride that while it was a Catholic home, it did not discriminate against Irish Protestants who were equally welcome and a space provided for their worship. Nationalities other than the Irish were welcome too, but while a scattering of those coming to the home in 1890 came from locations like England and Wales (87), Scotland (34) and five other European countries, the vast majority, 3,743, came from Ireland. The Irish immigrants who came to the home in 1890 although coming from all parts of the country did not represent an even distribution across Ireland. The largest numbers came mainly from the rural western seaboard and a few counties in particular:

|           |     |           |    |
|-----------|-----|-----------|----|
| Cork      | 476 | Longford  | 71 |
| Kerry     | 397 | Clare     | 70 |
| Galway    | 351 | Fermanagh | 60 |
| Tipperary | 267 | Cavan     | 53 |
| Mayo      | 291 | Kildare   | 50 |
| Roscommon | 262 | Dublin    | 45 |
| Limerick  | 215 | Monaghan  | 45 |
| Leitrim   | 159 | Wexford   | 44 |
| Donegal   | 147 | Down      | 36 |
| Waterford | 141 | Carlow    | 30 |
| Sligo     | 102 | Derry     | 30 |
| Kilkenny  | 88  | Louth     | 25 |
| Kings     | 78  | Wicklow   | 24 |

The American destinations of these Irish immigrant girls was as follows: 21.5% to New

*Illustration: The annual summer festival of the Home for Irish Immigrant Girls was usually held at Harlem River Park, the site of many Irish social activities. Courtesy of John Ridge.*

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*Illustration:*  
Father Michael J.  
Henry served as  
rector of the Home  
during the period  
1896–1922.  
Courtesy of John Ridge.

York City and Brooklyn, 10.6% to other New York State destinations, 12.5% to Pennsylvania, 12.2% to Connecticut, 11.9% to Massachusetts, 9.1% to New Jersey, 6.4% to Illinois and 2.5% to Rhode Island. The remainder scattered widely across many other states.<sup>2</sup>

The home did its best to cope with the large numbers of arrivals. On one night, March 6, 1891, 127 young Irish girls were harbored at the home at 7 State Street, taxing the capacity of the building to its fullest extent. Of the 11,000 girls landed in New York during the year 1897, 8,000 were fed or sheltered at the home.<sup>3</sup> In 1899 12,470 Irish girls arrived in the port and nearly 2,000 of them came to the home.<sup>4</sup> By 1911 upward of 100,000 girls were said to have shared the hospitality of the home, with 12,000 placed in employment.

#### THE IMMIGRANT HOME FAIR

In an attempt to support itself the mission solicited memberships at the rate of twenty-five cents a year, but the amount of these receipts did not even meet the interest on the immigrant home's debt. In order to raise the large amount of cash needed to keep the mission going, a grand metropolitan fair was held in May, 1890 for the benefit of the home. So successful was this event that the home was able to reduce its debt from \$60,000 to \$20,000.<sup>5</sup> Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore came expressly to the city to open the fair and to give the principal address at which he said:

*A new gem has been placed upon the fair brow of the Queen of Charity that reigns in your imperial city. Nor do I know of any other enterprise that has a stronger claim on your sympathy and support than the Home for Irish Immigrant Girls. These young maidens, after escaping the perils of the sea and landing on our shores, become a prey to the land-sharks that infest your city—more cruel and voracious than the monsters of the deep, for they seek to rob these innocent and confiding women not only of their scanty means, but also of what is most precious to them than life itself—their faith—the jewel of purity, for which the Irish maiden all over the world is so conspicuous.<sup>6</sup>*

The affair became an annual event and in 1893 was held at Jones' Wood at East 68 Street and the East River. A massive fire destroyed that complex in June, 1894, forcing the immigrant home to switch its festival back to Sulzer's Harlem River Park near East 127 Street, where the first two fairs had been held. The fair in 1896 attracted a crowd of more than 5,000 people. The profits this time made it possible for Father Michael J. Henry, a Roscommon native, who had succeeded Father O'Callaghan in April, 1896, to plan alterations to give the girls more room and make them more comfortable.

Whereas the committee for the annual festival of the Immigrant Girls Home had been composed exclusively of males in the early 1890s, by 1896 the running of the event was almost entirely in the hands of a ladies committee, practically all of them unmarried young women.<sup>7</sup> Even at this early point in the history of the home the alumni were in great evidence:

*A large proportion of the girls present had at one time or other, enjoyed the hospitality of the home, and the cordial reception of Father Henry's handshake of recognition betokened the esteem in which he was held.<sup>8</sup>*

The festival of the immigrant girls was idealized in contemporary newspaper accounts in the Irish-American press:

*Leaving the scene for a moment we descend to the well-kept grounds. Here, as the myriads of electric lights scintillated through the palm and shade trees, the grounds looked like a veritable fairy land. Shady nooks, rustic tables and chairs, the inevitable candy stall, a fish pond wherein the swain or maiden could hook a prize, provided that fate had not been already accomplished, photo gallery, swings, and last but not least—the joy of the little ones—the merry-go-round. Have we missed anything? Oh, yes. And that would never do. Rising above the merry shouts and laughter of happy childhood the old familiar strains of the Irish pipes in the hands of a master could be heard. A Galway fiddler lends his aid, and together they discourse music that delights the ear and makes the heart glad, of*

**TO IRELAND**

The comfort of the passenger is the first consideration on these splendid cabin steamers. Each ship is provided with an altar for devotional ceremonies and an experienced Irish Matron to care for the women and children on board.

Next Sailings From New York  
 S.S. WESTPHALIA - July 5  
 \*S.S. CLEVELAND - July 21  
 S.S. THURINGIA - July 26  
 \*Carries Cabin-Tourist-Third Class

Round Trip Rates \$150  
 improved Third Class

**HAMBURG-AMERICAN LINE**  
 39 BROADWAY, NEW YORK  
 or local steamship agents

*those at least, who first saw the light of day in the little isle across the sea?*

#### EMPLOYMENT

While the immigrant home was able virtually to connect every woman to a job ("employment for every girl willing to work") it was employment almost exclusively in the area of domestic service. Father Henry wrote in 1898:

*The columns of the daily press will show there is no diminution in the number of Irish girls landing this year. This class of immigrants is always welcome to our shores, and they always secure employment immediately. The home throws a mantle of protection around them when they land, directs and assists them at the barge office, and those who are not met by friends or who seek employment are brought to 7 State Street, where they are cared for free of*

*charge until their friends are met or employment secured.*<sup>10</sup>

Not just any home would due when it came to finding a job for a young immigrant girl. In 1903, for example, the home secured employment for 345 girls, as it proudly noted, "in good families."<sup>11</sup> The home's only warning about the prospects of work was a seasonal consideration. The height of summer and the depths of winter are very dull times in the labor market, "and no Irish boy or girl should come seeking employment at those seasons."

Employment prospects for women sometimes came in surprising ways. One such opportunity, which bordered on the incredible, came in 1893:

*Irish Girls Wanted in Dakota—Father Callaghan of the Mission of Our Lady of the Rosary, 7 State Street, has received a letter from Father Brown of Springfield, South Dakota, asking him to send out a carload of girls as soon as possible. He says that Mr. Dineen, a hotel keeper in Huron, requested him to write. Mr. Dineen says that the girls can find good husbands and plenty of employment.*<sup>12</sup>

The home could do little but warn immigrants of the dangers of making agreements prior to their emigration:

*Of late there seems to be a considerable number of Irish girls coming to this country on the strength of promise of employment made them by visitors to America, not a few of them are Irish by birth or descent. Girls should be very slow to accept such offers. With rare exceptions, employers who use such methods have their own selfish ends in view. This is borne out by the fact that almost invariably the wages arranged to be paid per month is from \$3 to \$5 less than the prevailing rate. One may rejoin that a girl need not remain with such an employer, but this is far easier said than done.*<sup>13</sup>

The home also asked certain immigrants not to come to America and distributed leaflets to that effect in Ireland. These warnings and letters

**Illustrations:**  
(right) Many former immigrant women, such as these serving on a feis committee, helped to raise money for the Home.

(below) After 1925, Irish immigrants were pre-screened by American immigration officials in Dublin and Cork, and could consequently disembark without going through Ellis Island.  
Courtesy of John Ridge.

sent to the newspapers tried to dispel the notion of the "pot of gold" waiting for newcomers in America:

*The fairly well-to-do, the aged and others ill-equipped to making a living, should not come under any circumstance. And here it may be well to mention that the United States is no longer an asylum for the unfit, immigrants showing symptoms of imbecility or insanity, contagious disease, intemperance and so forth—in fact, all who may be classed as undesirable and likely to become a public charge—are excluded. How many Irish boys and girls admitted would be far better off at home. They come to live in the cities, to compete with other immigrants accustomed to lower standards of living, or, in more*

Catherine McCartney, an Irishwoman, 30-years-old, arrived at Castle Garden on June 2, 1888. She was sick and destitute, but after she had



remained in the temporary hospital in the garden for three days she was permitted to start for Pittsburgh, where she said she had friends who would take care of her. The friends were not disposed to do anything of the kind, and the Pittsburgh authorities decided to return her to Castle Garden, and make formal charges against the commissioners for not using proper care in the examination of immigrants. By this time she wanted to return to Ireland, and was sent there on the steamship *State of Indiana*, the same ship that had brought her.<sup>15</sup>

New immigrants faced difficulties which led them to desperation. Such was the case with Elizabeth Heath in 1913, "a typical Irish girl, eighteen years old and pretty— an orphan," who could not find work after landing in New York. For two weeks she sought employment, and when the money ran out, slept in the parks, and in the dead of night bathed in the park lake. The criminal element could provide her work, but she would have none of it. Deciding she could endure no more she pinned a note to herself that read, "I'd rather die than not be a good girl" and took poison. Fortunately, her suicide was not successful, and after newspaper publicity highlighted her case, people came to her with financial aid, ranging from policemen to wealthy childless women. Poems were written about her as well, and for a brief period before she again faded from public view she was a New York celebrity.<sup>16</sup>

Employment for women could sometimes be more than just necessity, but a choice made in order to establish independence from one's family. A small sensation was created in 1910

**Your Relatives Who  
Are Coming Over**

Why not make all the arrangements for them? You can do it quickly and easily. Buy prepaid tickets and thus save them all the bother and trouble of securing their steamship accommodations. If you book them on a Cunarder, you will be sure of their travelling on a splendid ship and enjoying world-famous Cunard service and courtesy.

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BOOK THROUGH YOUR IRISH AGENT:

|  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Patrick McKenna, 210 E. 58th St.               | James Boylan, 9 Columbus Ave.        |
| Hugh Flood, 244 E. 64th St.                    | John J. Burke, 82 Eighth Ave.        |
| The Irish Emigrant Society,<br>51 Chambers St. | Patrick J. Grimes, 3 Columbus Circle |
|  | John F. Maher, 261 West 125th St.    |

Protect Your Funds With Cunard Traveller's Cheques

*attractive fields of employment, to enter the lists with the trained product of American schools and colleges.<sup>14</sup>*

It was impossible to completely stop unsuitable immigrants from coming anyway.

when Elsie Livingstone, the daughter of a prominent and wealthy Irish family, gave up a life of comfort and escaped to New York where she took up employment to support herself. The good offices of the *New York Irish Advocate* were used as a go-between to her family. The newspaper published her reply to her family's attempts to get her to come home:

*Mr. Editor; I beg to inform Mr. F.H. Livingstone that I am working in this city because I am free to do as I please, and my idea is, it is no disgrace to be an honest toiler in this city, while my father's wealth does not bother me at all. I am not the least ashamed of the position I hold for I think Mr. Livingstone is misinformed when he says my father is the wealthiest man in Ireland men in Ireland, for I think there are wealthier men right in the town of Westport, where the Livingstone's have always lived. Money never brings happiness to anyone, and it is my father's money which caused me to drop the Livingstone from my name and use my middle name for my last. I am healthy, happy and not at all afraid to work, even though my father was rich. Mr. Livingstone can have my address by calling on the editor of the Irish-American Advocate, Elsie Leislle.<sup>17</sup>*

#### THE ELLIS ISLAND YEARS

Irish immigration was very much a chain migration — earlier arrivals influenced many of those left behind in the old country to follow. As the immigrants from the era of the Great Hunger passed away, the links with family in Ireland became fewer, but the pull of family never let loose its hold. In the one year period from June 30, 1909 to June 30, 1910, some 20,736 of 23,174 Irish immigrants went to relatives, and another 1,866 went to friends. Only 572 reported that they were going to “others.”<sup>18</sup>

Immigration control in America was getting tighter in the new century. In 1904 Ellis Island authorities now required immigrants were required to have on landing, in addition to transportation costs inland to other American destinations, the sum of \$10. Those going beyond the Mississippi River were required to have from \$15 to \$25. Those not having the



required amounts were not allowed to proceed to their destinations.<sup>19</sup>

In his report for 1903, Father Henry stated that 50% of Irish immigrant girls now had their passages pre-paid from someone in America. This represented an increase from only 35% just five years earlier.<sup>20</sup>

Irish immigration began falling before World War I, and the proportion of Irish getting employment through the Ellis Island Labor Office was falling as well. In 1910 only 1,458 of the 6,332 placements were for Irish immigrants.<sup>21</sup>

After arrival at the steamship piers the immigrants were taken to Ellis Island for final examination. There, representatives of the mission interviewed the Irish immigrants and assisted them as far as possible. The assistance given took many forms. It might have been a timely warning about “new and doubtful acquaintances,” expediting discharge to claimants, advice about the journey to out-of-town destinations, the sending of a telegram, the giving of a little money—all welcome and encouraging services to the anxious newcomer.<sup>22</sup>

The home was always asked to do a bit more:

*Day by day from every state in the*

*Illustration: An advertisement for a 1936 feis to raise money for the Home. Courtesy of John Ridge.*

*union come letters asking us to meet and direct some particular Irish girl on her arrival. Anxious letters of inquiry are received from Ireland urging us to learn why some girl has failed to write that welcome letter home. We are often asked to locate people who landed in America years ago. Needless to say, this means a large correspondence and no small labor.*<sup>23</sup>

Fewer numbers of Irish immigrants allowed the home to concentrate more on related immigrant services, but sometimes the impossible was asked of the home. Father Henry received a letter from a young lady in Redlands, California at the beginning of the Spanish-American War. The writer asked the priest and his staff to meet her sister, Marie McCarthy, who be landing shortly. The home was informed she could be identified by a small American flag with the words "Remember the Maine" on it. When agent McCool tried to find her he realized his well-nigh impossible task as "fully one half of the young girls wore similar devices." All had been purchased in Ireland.<sup>24</sup>

Although the home continued to care primarily for immigrant girls after their arrival from Ireland, occasionally a girl would be rather reluctantly taken back into the home for a short time:

*We do not include in the number those who, only a short time in America and unable to keep their places, return to us. On principle we are opposed to their return. We impress upon the girls that once started in life they should be self-reliant and self-supporting. Moreover, the assurance of a Home like ours to return to would probably encourage them to leave their places for trivial reasons. Notwithstanding all this, cases have occurred and will occur where girls require protection for a time after landing, and as long as the mission stands they shall not be unfriended.*<sup>25</sup>

Employment in domestic service by most Irish immigrant girls was considered to be a temporary part of their lives, but it was not always easy to leave it. Once the immigrant girl entered domestic service, the restrictions placed

on her life by her employers often served to bind her for life to such work. If many employers got their way, the immigrant girl would have no social life at all. This prompted one older Irish couple, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Halpin, to open their doors to the young girls in order that they could welcome their friends:

*Mr. Halpin, or "Pete" as he was generally known, was for a number of years janitor of an apartment building named the "Raleigh" at 7 West Ninety-second Street. His position enabled him to make acquaintance of the many Irish girls employed by different families residing there. Life in apartment houses is generally dull, and in many instances, where the "madam" forbade company, the lovelorn maiden received the love sick swain in*



*"Pete's apartments," the inevitable result being that the "Raleigh" held the record for the number of maidens who left its portals to enter into the state of connubial bliss.*<sup>26</sup>

Emigration had been an act of no-return for practically all who came to America in the nineteenth century, but a change for the better was underway. The relative cheapness of transatlantic fares and the speed and comfort of ocean travel enabled many immigrants, especially the recent arrivals, to plan a journey home. The half dozen or so New York travel agents who specialized in doing business with other Irish immigrants regularly published in several of the New York Irish papers lists of everyone whom they had booked to Ireland along with their destinations. The married

*Illustration:  
A feis committee  
with Father  
Patrick J. Temple  
at the Home at  
7 State Street.  
Courtesy of John  
Ridge.*

status of the hundreds of female travelers each summer shows an overwhelming proportion of them was single. One list provided by the agent Patrick McKenna of 90th Street and Second Avenue is a typical example — 57 of the 66 excursionists were Misses.<sup>27</sup>

#### TITANIC SURVIVORS

The sinking of the *Titanic* in April, 1912 brought the Home for Irish Immigrant Girls directly into the public view to an unusual extent. The home was in the forefront in assisting the 40 or so Irish survivors, the majority of them women. Many New Yorkers who had never before heard of the home became acquainted with its work. When the *Carpathia* docked with the survivors in April, 1912, the priests and staff of the home, who had been serving on all the *Titanic* relief committees, met the Irish contingent at the pier, visited them at St. Vincent's Home, and later received some of them at the immigrant home. Over the weeks to come they "did everything in their power to console them and relieve their distress."

On April 28, 30 of the 40 survivors were present at the home for the distribution of \$1,500 in donations to them from the Irish Emigrant Society. Father Henry recalled the scene at the home at 7 State Street:

*There were tears and smiles, recitals brimful of pathos, tragedy and devotion, but uppermost in the hearts of all was gratitude to all mighty God. At least one incident that occurred is worth recording here. A corps of newspaper reporters attended. The girls—nearly all the boys perished—were asked to describe what they saw and heard, the launching of the lifeboats, the orders given by the officers and a hundred other happenings pertinent to the wreck.*<sup>28</sup>

One of the survivors, Nora Murphy, told reporters just how comfortable she was at the home:

*It was a new ray of hope to me, said (Nora Murphy) one of the survivors of the Titanic disaster, after my experience to be met by a priest as I walked off the Carpathia. Miss Murphy is a native of*

*Cork, but has been a nurse in Dublin for about seven years. She having told the writer of her experience she leaned back in her chair and said: "Here I am for the past three weeks." "And you will remain here," said Father Grogan intervening, "until you get a suitable position."*<sup>29</sup>

Survivors were the highlight of the home's summer festival in June with one of them, Eugene Daly, entertaining on the Irish pipes. Several of the *Titanic* girls continued their close association with the home over the next twenty years.

#### THE FINAL YEARS

World War I started the changes that would curtail much of the work of the home. New rules at Ellis Island no longer permitted the discharge to the home of girls who had been temporarily detained. They could then remain at the home until conditions were complied with. The detentions at Ellis Island reduced the number of girls received at the home. In 1917 only 1,277 Irish females were able to enter the United States. The war had virtually cut off all Irish immigration.<sup>30</sup>

Immigration from Ireland revived slowly in the 1920s, but the death of Father Michael J. Henry, rector of the home for more than twenty-five years, in October, 1922, cast a shadow over the future of the institution. The new immigration act of 1924 established a quota which limited the annual number of arrivals from all Ireland to 37,430. Moreover, the number was distributed over the entire year, not allowing for the heavy seasonal immigration in spring and summer which had always been characteristic from Ireland. For the twelve-month period ending June 30, 1924, the entire Free State quota was exhausted. In the twelve months ending June 30, 1924, the home accommodated only 156 Irish immigrant girls, but in the following year the number increased to 425.

The most important change that reduced the work of the immigrant home came in 1925 when the American consulate in Dublin was allowed to set up facilities for the medical and general immigration examination in Dublin and Queenstown (Cobh). This enabled prospective immigrants to obtain certification of admission before they arrived in New York. This eliminated

the necessity of going to Ellis Island for the majority of Irish immigrants.<sup>31</sup>

The depression drastically interrupted immigration from Ireland, and in the period from 1931 to the late 1940s there was very small numbers of immigrants arriving. In 1933 the mission was able to state, however, that 170,000 Irish girls had been “harbored” at the mission and that 30,000 had been given employment through its offices.<sup>32</sup>

Up to the beginning of World War I, the home for Irish immigrant girls continued its work, but in the late 1930s there was really very little to do. Some fund-raising continued, and a feis at Coney Island in support to the home was begun in 1935. The last rector, Father Patrick J. Temple, published a magazine which contained articles relating to the history of the home, and for a while 7 State Street just seemed to sit and wait for the next deluge from Ireland. The trickle of Irish immigration was finally shut off by the outbreak of World War II. The end of the home came not in a dramatic announcement but, like an old soldier, it just faded away.

17 *Irish Advocate*, April 16, 1910

18 *Irish Advocate*, October 18, 1910

19 *Irish Advocate*, October 8, 1904

20 *Irish American*, October 1, 1904

21 *Irish Advocate*, February 18, 1911

22 *Irish Advocate*, October 18, 1910

23 *Irish Advocate*, September 8, 1904

24 *Irish World*, July 2, 1898

25 *Irish Advocate*, October 8, 1904

26 *Irish Advocate*, November 3, 1906

27 *Irish Advocate*, July 3, 1911

28 *Irish Advocate*, October 12, 1912

29 *Irish Advocate*, May 11, 1912

30 *Irish Advocate*, June 1, 1918

31 *Irish Advocate*, August 8, 1925

32 *Irish Advocate*, September 30, 1933

## Notes

1 *Irish World*, March 4, 1891

2 *Irish World*, March 4, 1891

3 *Irish World*, January 15, 1898

4 *Irish World*, January 27, 1901

5 *Irish World*, October 9, 1890

6 *Irish World*, October 9, 1890

7 *Irish World*, June 23, 1896

8 *Irish World*, July 21, 1897

9 *Irish World*, July 18, 1896

10 *Irish World*, June 18, 1898

11 *Irish Advocate*, December 31, 1911

12 *Irish World*, January 14, 1893

13 *Irish Advocate*, October 18, 1910

14 *Irish Advocate*, December 31, 1911

15 *Irish Advocate*, July 23, 1888

16 *Irish Advocate*, September 6, 1913