

Roots-Grandma Wogan

When I try to remember my Grandma Wogan, I always end up in the same place and it's probably where my siblings and most of the Monroe Street neighbors end up, too. I can see her on a warm summer day, sitting in her wicker chair in which she logged thousands of hours. She would be on the front porch of the two flat, the porch guarded by two white stone flowerpots filled with petunias, wearing her print dress with an apron, glasses on, her white hair in a bun, and she would be rubber-banding newspapers. The Daily News, the Austin News, The Austinite, or Goldblatt's circulars, depending on which boy had which paper route. Her hands were always busy, as befitting someone who was an expert seamstress for many years.

She was a caring, loving, old time Catholic grandmother, who bore on her back the lonely burden of young widowhood, making it somehow work for her two sons without the social welfare benefits so many enjoy today, and going it alone in her adopted country. But she mostly kept whatever joys and pains she felt to herself. To be honest, she was not warm, at least not outwardly so and certainly not given to outbursts of any kind; maybe that was the cost of dealing with her lot in life, which she met with determination and courage, and usually all alone.

But she was not dull. At the risk of making a generalization, there are two words not often used to describe the Irish: nuanced and subtle. She could be blunt, as was her way, but it made for some pretty good stories. My mother told me how she and my dad shared the news of my impending arrival with her. She is said to have responded, "So, two wasn't enough for you," referring to my older sister and brother. And yet, upon my arrival, again according to my mother, she swooped me up in her arms and I was not seen again for about the next twelve years. My mother was a little prone to hyperbole.

My father told the story of her being invited to her relatives, the Lancaster's, for dinner. Theirs was a fancy home off Columbus Park, and the husband was the all-powerful Alderman Lancaster. In those days, power descended from the Lord God Almighty through the Mayor of Chicago to your Alderman and finally to the local Police Commander and maybe the Catholic Pastor. According to my father, she was uncharacteristically quiet throughout the fancy dinner, served by maids on fine linen and china. When asked by Claire Lancaster how she liked the evening, she replied, "Well, you've come a long way since you used to haul a loin of pork to your father's tavern." That was their last invitation.

Mary Maeliff

My Grandma was born on July 17th, 1881 but we never celebrated her birthday. She never cared to and I never knew why and, by extension, I guess we learned to overlook it in a house full of birthdays every year. As a consequence, we lost track of how old she was, and I think maybe she did, too, but she was just shy of 95 when she died on April 9, 1976.

She was born in County Westmeath, Ireland in a little nothing of a village called Tinnymuck, near the larger town of Moate. My Irish brother-in-law Jim will be only too happy to tell you that Tinnymuck translates into "Pig's House," the better to get a rise out of his wife, my sister Mary Ann. I found Tinnymuck on my first visit to Ireland years ago, and the "village", once located after asking directions twice from the locals, consisted of four houses in a row and dog named "Doogan" who I had to kick out of my way in order to drive the car down the road. If ever I wondered that I might be descended from wealth, that visit took care of it. My father's cousin, Mary Colgan, now deceased, lived in the house then, a humble home with the smell of countless turf fires burned into the walls.

Grandma and her sister Kate left the hunger and joblessness of Ireland in 1905, seeking the America of hope and freedom that countless other Europeans sought. My brother Terry found her ship's passage documents and most notably that her Captain was also the same Captain Smith whose luck ran out a few years later as skipper of the Titanic. Glad you dodged the iceberg on their trip, Captain.

Kate and Grandma worked as maid and cook for a Protestant businessman, we were told, until she met Thomas Wogan, a man from Tullamore. They were wed in 1914, and the Marriage Certificate said she was 28 years old and he 29. The numbers don't work, by the way, because she was 33, but if we want to start arresting every woman who fibbed about her age, the jails would be overflowing.

He would be dead four years later of tuberculosis that he probably carried with him to the New World. She was left with her sons Bill and Tom, my dad, then about six months old. She and her husband had purchased a two flat at 5347 Monroe, where three generations of Wogans ended up living until 1968. I can't even begin to imagine how scared and alone she must have felt at that time in her life. There was no welfare network back then, no social security, and probably little or no insurance. My father told me that she was advised to sell the house, but she didn't.

A word about two flats, that marvelous economic engine that allowed immigrant generations to own a property, many for the first and only time in their lives, and pay for it with rental income while keeping a roof over their own heads. Three bedrooms and a single bath on each floor, a wooden back porch, coal furnace, and hot water radiator heat. The west side was and is a virtual sea of two flats. Having grandparent owners on one floor and your family on the other was quite common. The Lithuanians and Bohemians in Cicero took it a step further, adding a basement or "Garden" apartment and renting the top two floors, building their wealth and security faster.

My Grandma lived on the first floor and rented the second floor to make her mortgage payments. Years later, in the 1950's I believe, she added a basement apartment as an additional rental unit. She took in sewing to buy the groceries and she toughed it out for all those years. She worked outside the home once, during World War II at Simpson Electric. Because single apartments were scarce after the war, she also took in "roomers", single men looking for a private bedroom and breakfast, the original "bed and breakfast". I remember a parade of them as the occupant of one of the three bedrooms. They could tie up a bathroom mightily in the morning, and more than once my brothers and I ended up using the standpipe in the basement. First class accommodations.

These are some of my favorite Grandma Wogan stories.....

Wash Day

She was locked in mortal combat with Mrs. Stack, the grandmother of the Junius family two doors east. On wash day, if she looked out her back window and saw that Mrs. Stack had hung her bed sheets to dry on the clotheslines that crisscrossed the small back yards, it was if she had spotted an enemy sail on the horizon. She would moan that "The Stacks have their laundry out, the day is gone!" Then quick to the basement to get her sheets out of the washer and put a shot across Mrs. Stack's bow.

Baseball

She loved baseball and the White Sox and listened to them in her back bedroom on summer nights on an old Philco Radio. The radio was a rounded four foot high wooden box, with about fifty knobs, only two of which ever seemed to do anything. She had a television, but didn't trust it, having been around before even the invention of radios. I can still see her clapping her hands when Nellie Fox got a hit and drove in "Leetle Louie" Aparicio from second base. What mystified me was how she learned the game. Baseball is perhaps the most complex of modern sports and she really did know what was happening on the field. My dad and uncle both played ball into their late teen years, so she picked it up from her sons, I guess.

Don't mess with my religion

Grandma Wogan was very devout, praying always to the Virgin Mary and fingering her rosary beads at least once a day while muttering to herself the Hail Mary's, Our Fathers, and Glory Be's. So when Vatican II came along and made so many changes in the 1960's, the biggest of which were turning the altar around and killing off Latin (which needed killing, in my opinion) she was understandably a bit confused. One day, walking back from church, she sked me, "Who's this fella Yahweh they're always talking about? Does he live in the parish?" "I didn't quite know how to answer her.

Apparitions in the night

She managed one stormy night to scare my cousin Billy half to death. By brother Bill, our cousin Bill and I had been awarded the most coveted sleeping spot in the whole house... the pull out bed on the screened in back porch. On hot summer nights, it was as close to air conditioning as you were likely to get. One particularly bad stormy night, with lightening flashing and thunder booming, my cousin Bill awoke to a sight my brother and I had long grown used to. My Grandma Wogan in her white flannel floor length nightgown, white hair undone and falling around her shoulders, walking through the kitchen saying prayers and tossing holy water (holy or not an excellent conductor of electricity!) from a small vial about the house. It was her way of asking God to spare 5347 Monroe and perhaps smite someone else's house.

The lightening flashed and lit her up like an apparition from the Other Side and Cousin Bill must have been sleeping soundly, because he let out a yell and bailed from the bed, headed toward the back door. We caught him in time and needled him for weeks about it.

The Apple Story

I have told this story to my grandsons and, for whatever reason, it has stuck with them. I was watching my Grandma eat an apple and she simply consumed the entire thing. Stem, seeds, core and all. I was probably ten and I remarked to my Dad that I had seen her do this. He sort of shrugged, looked at me with a smile and said, "You've never been hungry." It struck me that I hadn't ever known hunger, never in my life for more than a short time. None of us had, but she remembered what it felt like to not have food, and for your body to miss it and to let you know it missed it. She could remember going to bed with an empty stomach. And she was never going to let food go to waste again.

Housing Arrangements

My siblings needled me about being "the king" because I got to sleep in the front bedroom and the rest of them shared bedrooms upstairs. Over the years, however, I shared the bedroom with my brother Bill, and later my sister Mary Ann occupied the back bedroom, after the parade of "roomers" ended. The basement apartment, always smelling damp, was occupied by a string of renters, some memorable and some notorious. The last one was my Uncle Jimmy, who kept Eskimo Pies in his sort-of freezer and built models of all sorts. You can't get cooler as an uncle than that.

The Phone

I always thought it ironic that in my business we made and received millions of phone calls over the years, but Grandma never made a single phone call in her life. In those days, phones could only be leased, not purchased, and the phone company kept a strict control over ownership of phones. My Dad knew a guy in the Linesman Union who rigged up a bootleg office phone in my Grandma's flat, then ran a buzzer from the legitimate line upstairs to this illegal extension. The extension had neither a ringer nor a dial because the phone company was known to dial into homes and check the voltage. Too much voltage and they knew you had more phones than you were paying for each month. They would send an inspector over and he would locate and remove the device. Small wonder non one liked the phone company.

Grandma Wogan never did get the hang of telephonic communication. When the buzzer rang she would pick up the handset and say hello, but if the call was for me or one of the other kids, she would hang up and call your name, disconnecting your call. The few times the call was for her was when a relative named Tom Byrne called in to report on the death of someone. She would listen to Tom, whom we christened the "angel of death", and then say "Ok, Thanks" and hang up. Not one to waste words, Grandma Wogan.

Last Rites

I remember when I was ten or twelve, she got sick and my parents called for a doctor, then a priest. Over her headboard hung a crucifix that also served as a handy kit for entering the next world in a properly Catholic fashion. The crucifix was about two inches thick and made of wood. Push Christ's body up and to the right and the front part of the cross swung out to reveal all of the pieces and parts needed for Extreme Unction, or Last Rites. Candles, a little holy water, a small purple stole. I'll bet you that crucifix hung in every Catholic home in Chicago. We might not have a first aid kit handy, but by God, we weren't shoving off without the Last Rites. She didn't die, by the way.

My Grandma the Physician

I cannot verify these little tales, but here is what I was told:

She fixed my Uncle Bill's forehead which had been slashed somehow. She used scotch tape.

She noticed one of the newborns, Bill, I think, was tongue tied and solved it with a snip of her sewing scissors. My mother was horrified, but it worked.

This one I can verify: When I was twelve I caught a bad cold. No problem, Grandma fixed me up a hot toddy. Warm whiskey and lemon juice in an eight ounce glass. I drank it down and lost two days that I flat out don't remember. Mom was not too happy.

It occurs to me that I only really knew my Grandma Wogan as Grandma, from the time when she was about 70 until her death. I did not know her as a girl, a young immigrant, a young wife, or a young widow. I did not know much about her life through two World Wars, the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression, her years of motherhood. In the same way, I only knew my parents from their mid-thirties through the rest of their lives. I can look at pictures of them as children or as beautiful young people, but I can't know, no one can, what they were like at that point in their lives. Would we have been friends if somehow we were the same age? Would we have been alike or different from each other?

Only one sort of relative knows your story from the beginning through today. Only your brothers and sisters make the journey with you from start to finish, know you as a child, a teen, a young adult and all of the stages of your life. For that reason alone, we should value each other all the more and count ourselves blessed that there are those out there who know us best, celebrate our successes and forgive our faults.

Special thanks to my brother Terry and my sister Mary Ann for providing the research on this.