

# IRISH IN AMERICA

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TODAY?

*Rich Carlson*

I AM PRECISELY seven-eighths Irish and one-eighth Swedish. I grew up in a suburb of New York City, in a town called Suffern, in the 60s and 70s. Suffern had a typical population at the time. There was a mix of ethnic groups including first generation immigrants as well as families that had been in the states for multiple generations. The largest groups were the Irish and Italian Catholics, as well as Jewish Americans, from mostly Eastern Europe. On one side, my grandmother had emigrated directly from Leitrim to the U.S. when she was 16, and on the other side, my family had been in the US for over four generations and had sent their boys to the best universities in America including Harvard. Frankly, they thought they were of a higher class than my grandmother who spoke with an Irish brogue, but they were happy my mother had at least married a man of Irish descent.

I grew up as a typical American kid. We played baseball, American football,



basketball, had cookouts and camp outs, went to the beach in the summer, and did other typical American suburban things. And yet, it meant a mix of both good and bad things to be Irish. On the plus side, if you were Irish Catholic, you were supposed to be tough. You did not get bullied and you could give and take a punch. I remember my Dad and his friends recounting various altercations they had gotten into as youths that ended with fisticuffs. It was not important to win or lose a brawl but you were expected to not back down when cornered and to be a tough customer no matter how big the opponent. "Make them remember you, Laddie" was how the elders communicated it. Not only were you expected to be tough but it was equally important to have a strong, strong work ethic and be able to put your head down and labor for hours. I remember my Grandmother shoveling snow in her 70s and finishing the job before I got down to her apartment to help her. If she could do this after the age of 70, I could hardly complain about raking leaves or some other chore.

We were also expected, like the Jews, to excel in school and achieve at higher academic levels than our parents. The generations before us made significant sacrifices to help us get through universities. The same grandmother "scrubbed floors" to ensure that my uncle and father got into the best Catholic high school in New York City.

There were also some negative stereotypes hoisted upon us. The



**The Carlson family visit the Gilbride home. Pictured here with Pdraig Gilbride and his mother Annie (RIP)**

Italians were not shy at labeling the Irish as drunkards and, in fact, there did seem to be a fair amount of alcoholic abuse in our community. We countered by sticking all of them with the "mafia" label no matter what their dads did for a living! Somehow this nasty name-calling had no impact upon our friendships. While some of our parents stuck mostly to their own kind, the barriers began breaking down. Simply put, suburban Americans had more in common with each other than they did with folks from the same ethnic "tribe" who were either in a different class or lived outside of suburbia.

Now, I am 50 years old with a family of my own. We live in a suburb of Washington DC with five kids. In the DC region, there are new immigrant families from Korea, China, Pakistan, India, Ethiopia and a host of families from Latin America including Mexico, El Salvador, Peru and many other countries. Their arrival has changed my identity. I am no longer Irish American. They do not see me as different from my Italian American or my Jewish American friends growing up. Instead I am simply an established white guy. And they are probably right. I married an Italian American and nearly every one of my "Irish" friends married non Irish spouses and we all had kids that are typical American suburban kids. To top it off, my wife and I adopted a daughter from China.

So do I or my kids still have an Irish

identity? We took a wonderful vacation to Western Ireland seven years ago, in part, to find out. I am not sure we answered the question but it was a memorable and magical trip. We spent several days with my second cousin Pdraig Gilbride of Leitrim, in the same house my Grandmother grew up in. My kids were mesmerized by his cattle and the wood stove in the living room. My wife and I were equally impressed by the greenery and natural beauty of the landscape. We traveled the country, hitting many of the typical sites: the energetic city of Galway, the rocky terrain of the Burren,

the castles and majestic renaissance churches, and the stunning Cliffs of Moher.

Ireland is a truly beautiful country. As we drove from one site to another, I had this urge to just stop the van and go for a hike on the land. Speaking of driving, we did get into a mishap that says something about Ireland. As we navigated the narrow streets of a small town in a rented small bus, not the minivan we envisioned, my wife swerved to avoid an oncoming car and clipped a parked car, knocking off the mirror. We stopped to survey the damage. An older gentlemen popped out, "Are ye

on holiday?" "Yes, we are. This was our fault and we will compensate you for the mirror!" "No, no...you go on with that beautiful family. Tis nothing but a little scratch" he said, fingering the mirror hanging by one wire at the side of the car!

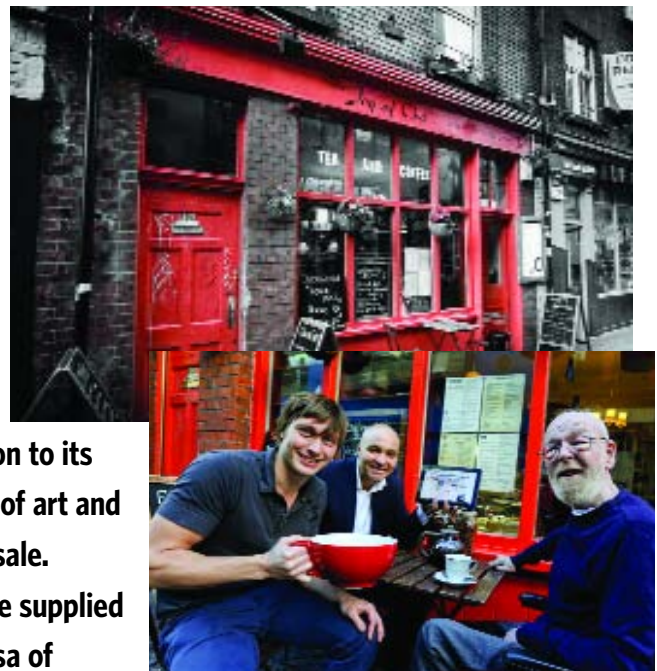
We are proud of our children and their Irish heritage. They are tough athletes, good students, and, most importantly, very warm people. They love the land as much as they cherish their consumer electronics. Perhaps more of Ireland rubbed off on them than I appreciated at the time. We cannot wait to come back.

## ***THE JOY OF CHA*** FIRST WINNER OF @eircombusiness Digital Boost

**Mohill man Dara Gallagher from The Joy of Cha, and his business partner Sergey Letsko, are delighted to be the first winners of Eircom's Digital Boost initiative. The eircom Digital Boost initiative is designed to help SME owners increase their digital presence and maximise their online potential.**

**As winners of Digital Boost, The Joy of Cha will benefit from a brand new state-of-the-art website, a strategy day with digital and marketing experts from the eircom Expert Panel to provide consultation specific to their business and a telecoms package for one year, all to the 10,000.**

**Situated in Temple Bar, the specialist tea shop, which was set up in 2006 sells more than 50 different types of teas, imported from every part of the world. It also sells all of the key accessories to enhance the enjoyment of tea, from teapots to strainers. Seating approximately 30 people, The Joy of Cha has a unique charm and even boasts a real fire, which provides a cosy feeling of relaxation to its customers. From time to time it holds exhibitions of art and photography, with much of the art on display for sale. While specialising in tea, the shop also sells coffee supplied by small artisan coffee importer and roaster, Ariosa of Ashbourne. They also do a great trade in homemade scones.**



**Sergey Letsko, Gary Disley, Eircom Marketing Director & Dara Gallagher**