

# Maryanne's American Wake

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IT WAS 11th February 1997 when I made my weekly visit to my parents John and Mary Teresa Beirne of Connacranaghy, Kilclare. Having exchanged greetings with them and as I proceeded to make tea, I detected a note of nostalgia in my mother's voice. I enquired as to why, and she did indeed confirm my suspicions. She and my father had been reminiscing about old times and she had remembered an event in her life which made a lasting impression on her. It was her cousin Maryanne McTiernan's 'American Wake'. This is my mother's own story of that night. Her keenness of memory put me to shame.

On the 11th February 1947 (Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes) my sister Lizzie Ann Keane and I, Mary Teresa, were anxious to see our cousin Maryanne before she left for America the next day. She was to leave her beloved home, mother and sisters in Stranagarvina, Ballinaglera to travel to her Aunt, also Maryanne, in New York. Like so many other young women and men of that era, she hoped to find employment and make a successful happy life in the New World. My sister Lizzie Ann had a bicycle and used it every day as her mode of transport to Drumshanbo to work in Lairds Jam factory. My older brother John Francis also had a bicycle, to him it was his Rolls Royce and not even the Pope stood a chance of

getting a lend of it. Knowing how close I had been to Maryanne over the years, and how much I needed to see her before she left, he agreed to me having his bicycle to cycle the fourteen miles to Ballinaglera. When we had all our chores done and dinner eaten we set off on our long cycle. It was a grey overcast day and a light slushy fall of snow covered the ground, a great silence lay over the countryside as if waiting for the big snow of '47. I recall that we didn't meet many people on the way. This was surprising as there was a reasonable population at that time. Blackbirds, thrushes, robins, and wagtails played hide and seek along the roadside as they searched for food. We chatted freely, recalling many happy memories of staying in Aunt Kate's house in Ballinaglera and playing with our cousins as children.

We arrived at dusk to a warm welcome by Aunt Kate. She was our mother Alice's sister. She had married a local man of the same surname, Pat McTiernan. Kate, like all her siblings had been born to John McTiernan and Maryanne Horan in the townland of Aughrim, across the yellow river. Sadly her husband Pat was to die at a young age. Becoming a young widow she was left to raise a family of six young girls. Kate was an elegant lady of great stamina who's love and kindness seemed to radiate from her

smile. She could converse on any topic, politics, religion, fashion, music or anything that was typical at the time, and was modern in her thinking. On arrival we had tea, homemade wheaten bread and currant cake. It was soon after the war, and as rationing was still in operation, it's likely that the dried fruit came in an American parcel the previous Christmas.

As nightfall approached, neighbours young and old arrived to the kitchen, they were giving Maryanne a big send off. Fiddle, flute and tin whistle players took their places on the long furr placed along the back wall. Frank Pat Gilmartin was one of the flute players. The dances called were half sets, stack of barley, barn dance, waltzes and the Siege of Ennis. Young and old knocked sparks off the kitchen floor. Mugs of tea and scythe stone slices of treacle bread were passed around to the thirsty dancers.

Maryanne was leaving on the 12 noon train from Carrick the next day. At 12.30 am the dancing and music stopped and a sudden silence came upon the crowd. One could slice the atmosphere of sadness. The older people, one by one kissed and hugged Maryanne as they pressed a coin in her hand for good luck, or a medal, or Sacred Heart badge for safety, more than likely got from the Nuns in Drumshanbo. The younger

people in turn bid their farewells, knowing only too well that they too would soon follow in her footsteps to Yankee land.

Next morning Maryanne and I walked over the half mile to say goodbye to her old friend and neighbour Mrs McMorow. This would be the last time they would meet.

The sun was shining even though it was a chilly morning. Little conversation passed between us on the way over and back. I had a lump of sadness in my throat and I suspect Maryanne had the same.

At 11am Francie Lee, the hackney driver who lived past Skerry Rynn's, arrived to take Maryanne on the first leg of her long journey to the US. Her mother Kate and her younger sisters Ena and Patsy accompanied her to the train station in Carrick. It was a tearful and very sad parting for all of us. Having arrived in Dublin she got the train to Limerick and then got the bus to Shannon airport, known then as Rianá. Having all her documentation checked she boarded the plane called the 'Yankee Chipper'. The first stage of the flight took them to Gander

Airport, Goose Bay in Newfoundland. Having refuelled there, the plane attempted to take off but failed, as the snow was several feet deep on the runway. Eventually they arrived in New York where Maryanne was met by her Uncle Myles and Aunt Maryanne. The total flight was twenty hours.

I stayed on with Aunt Kate and the girls, for a few days and a telegram arrived to say she had arrived safely in New York. In the weeks that followed I anxiously awaited a letter from Maryanne that she promised.

When it did arrive my hands trembled as I opened it. She described her journey to the new world as long, lonely and very cold. Her feet and hands had swollen while they were in Canada. Maryanne was not to return home to her beloved Stranagarvina for eleven years. During that time her sisters Kathleen, Helen, Ena and Patsy, my sister Lizzie Ann and my brother John Francis, all had joined her in New York. Maryanne and I corresponded regularly by letter, keeping up with home news, never forgetting her roots in Stranagarvina. When she did arrive

home on holiday in early 1960's Ireland had begun to change. The days of the house dances were coming to an end, and the dance hall showbands, carnivals or marquees were becoming very popular. My younger brother Packie Joe had been to England and had a car by now. He used to take Maryanne and I to dances in the carnivals. It was a real novelty. Maryanne got married and had two sons. She worked hard and came home as often as she could to visit her mother and her sister Alice. She liked her sons to have as much time with their grandmother and Aunt as possible.

Maryanne's last visit home was in June 1988. Her mother Kate had passed away and her sister Alice was in the home place. After she returned to the US she became ill. Sadly she passed away on May 28th 1995. I was in Lourdes on that day praying at the Grotto. I remembered all my family including my dear friend and cousin Maryanne. We remember all the above mentioned especially John F Keane, who passed away in May 2013. May he rest in peace.