

The Last Whelan

During a family visit about 20 years ago, my mother had given me plastic sealed envelope of papers and photos on the history of her side of the family: the Whelan's. She was adamant about giving the packet to me as opposed to one of the other four siblings, and I wasn't sure why. She said something like- this is the history of your family and I want you to keep these records. I said ok; whatever. Later I quickly flipped through it. The Packet consisted of several photos and about 50 or so pages of type-out information in a form of various stories and some scattered renditions of family trees. I glanced it over, without much interest then when I got home, tossed it in the back of a file drawer with other records and such. And there the Packet stayed there for the past 20 years.

The bulk of the information in the Packet was an essay and story based on much research done by a distant (Whelan) relative named Dan Wagner but I still am uncertain as to how I am related. I believe him to be a cousin of my grandmother, Virginia Whelan. Dan spent time in Ireland it appears in the early 1970's and typed out this large volume of pages about the Whelan family history and the ancestral area around Knockananna in County Wicklow. One of the items in the packet was a letter from my grandmother, being very enthusiastic about the story that Dan compiled. She had the hope that all the Whelan-Wayne children would be able to someday make a trip to Ireland to see the beauty and the people of the country.

My spouse Kendra and I had been planning our trip to France for the past couple of years, and the side trip to Ireland was at first unplanned and added to our agenda just a few months before we left. A couple of weeks before we left for Europe I remembered the packet of family information and pulled it out of the file drawer and studied it for over several days. The stories by Dan were a bit flowery, but quite detailed and interesting and written with great devotion.

I decided then that one of the trips we had to take while in Ireland was to try to track down the family gravesites in Knockananna so I made a copy of Dan's entire packet and the photos along with a "to whom it may concern" letter about who I was, and my contact information. I put it all in a waterproof envelope and figured if I did find a Whelan gravesite I would just leave the envelope at the site and see what, if anything, would happen.

Kendra and I had a wonderful two-week bicycle tour visiting France. We ended it up with a few days in Paris and then took our scheduled flight for the second part of our trip to Ireland.

After a few hours figuring out how to escape Dublin and learn how to drive on the left side of the road we exited the main expressway and ended up in the village of Hacketstown where we had an amazing lunch at a local pub then continued our journey. On a very narrow road outside of the town I realized my rental car map was useless and I drove around looking for an occupied house where I could ask directions. Shortly I encountered an old man walking toward me with his dog so I got out with map in hand

and asked if he could point out how to get to Knockananna. I couldn't understand a word he said but I figured out he was telling us to drive down a certain road for about 20 minutes. And after a short while we found the village of several well-kept homes, a small school, a convenience store and two pubs. Centered in the village is the Church of the Immaculate Conception along with its ancient graveyard. The grounds were meticulously attended and you could sense that great pride was taken in the care of the area and of the church. After a short stroll of the cemetery we soon found several Whelan ancestors and a very well kept family plot. I compared the notes and names of Dan Wagner's information, and aside from a few minor misspellings, here were the names of many of my ancestors throughout the cemetery. At the central site of the family plot I left a bottle of Guinness as an offering and I was planning to leave Dan's Packet there as well, but the church was open so I sealed up the Packet and wrote on it –Whelan- in large letters then placed the Packet in the church vestibule.

We were on a bit of a schedule to get to the cottage we rented still several hours to the south near Cork, but before we left we decided to stop in the local Knockananna pub The Wagon Wheel and toast a pint to the Whelan family.

A few days later while checking my email I received a lengthy correspondence from Shelia Whelan who apparently lives in the area and someone from the church had delivered the Packet to her. She was very excited to get the information and indicated that through her ailing aunt, she had heard a family story of a relative named Dan from the states who had spent time in Ireland in the 70's visiting relatives and writing about the family. Shelia had never met Dan and apparently remaining members of the Whelan family could not remember much about the American relative or what became of his writing other than someone had once come over from US years ago. Shelia's elderly aunt didn't like to discuss old family stories any more so the tale of Dan Wagner's journey years ago probably just became another anecdote at the local pub. But by my leaving the Whelan Packet at the church in Knockananna, Shelia now had a piece of a missing puzzle she had wondered about for years.

Sipping coffee at the rented cottage that morning I looked out at the Irish countryside and at the beautiful country estate where we were staying along the Bandon River. It was a heartwarming moment for me to read Shelia's email. I felt like I had fulfilled some family prophecy or wish, as there was obviously a reason the Packet had been given to me so many years earlier. From Dan's writing there did not appear to be any famous people in the lineage; most of the family were weavers and farmers; simple Irish county folks. I have since stayed in touch with Shelia. Kendra and I are planning a trip back to Ireland next year and Shelia has insisted that we visit and stay and meet some of the relations so I am sure there will be another chapter of added to the Whelan story. Or at least a few pub stories.

I am still trying to trace down exactly who Dan Wagner is and find out if he is alive. My mother (now Joan Wayne) is the last of this Whelan lineage living in the United States as far as I can determine. All of her sisters are gone, and the Whelan name ended when my Grandparents passed on several years ago.

I have since been in touch with some distant cousins and have shared the story of the Whelan Packet, which I have transferred to digital format. This way it can be sent out and it won't sit in my computer files for the next 20 years.

The other day I ran across a quote from an interview with Irish author Maeve Binchy:

"The Irish do love telling stories, and we are suspicious of people who don't have long, complicated conversations. There used to be a rule in etiquette books that you should invite four talkers and four listeners to a dinner party. That doesn't work in Ireland, because nobody knows four listeners."

I now feel I have a special Irish story that is worth a good listening to.

Michael Wayne
Oct 2013

mwsarasota@gmail.com