

Finding an old Irish homestead, and new cousins

By Emilie C. Harting

The tattered photo of a house with six front windows was the only piece of paper left of my grandmother's past. She died in New York in 1963. I knew that Anna Elizabeth Anderson emigrated from Northern Ireland in 1902 when she was 19, but she had always been quiet about her early life.

Because I remembered her brothers' names, a researcher at the Belfast Public Record Office was able to find the name of her village, Sixmilecross, halfway across the country.



The house on Daisy Hill, County Tyrone, where the writer's grandmother lived as girl until she moved to Philadelphia.

"Why are you coming here?" the B&B owner asked when I called to book a room for the next night.

"My grandmother emigrated from Sixmilecross," I said. "I'd like to visit the cemetery."

"What were your ancestors' names?"

When I replied, "Anderson," she gasped and fell silent. Finally, she said: "Your great-grandparents were my grandparents. We've been waiting to hear from your branch of the family for decades."

As I stood in a street-corner phone booth, she launched into a tearful 45-minute family history. "My B&B is in your grandmother's old schoolhouse right on the main street. I'll take you up to Daisy Hill,

where descendants of Andersons have lived since they came here from Scotland in 1610."

The house in my photo stood on a plateau overlooking a breathtaking scene of bright green fields dotted by whitewashed houses in all directions, many of them connected to the family by blood or circumstance. The sounds of lowing cows and bleating sheep wafted through the air.

We entered the kitchen where my grandmother had warmed herself by a peat fire, helped her mother cook, and listened to stories after Saturday-night baths in a tin tub. With the current owner, a young man with my father's first and middle name, we climbed to the top of Daisy Hill and looked down over the valley. The property was a sprawling farm once controlled by Sir Verner and the English Lord Belvedere, but it had been gradually deeded over to the family by various land acts.

That night at dinner, I passed my photograph around the table of gathered relatives. "That's your great-grandfather," they said, pointing to a shadow in the front doorway. I'd missed it.

I'd also brought a picture of my grandmother sitting on the grass with a group of children when she made her one visit back in the 1950s. Several middle-aged women giggled and pointed themselves out.

My grandmother used to take me on walks in New York when I was a little girl. She would lift me up so I could slip her mysterious blue air-mail letters into mailboxes. But it wasn't until I took this trip to Sixmilecross that I found out she had also sent huge boxes of beautifully crafted clothes to her nieces, now in their 80s. One of them was Marion, the proprietor of the Schoolhouse B&B.

My newfound cousins and I now send old family stories across the ocean via e-mail. They tell me that somewhere, in a cousin's nephew's son's house, there may be a trunk with packets of blue onionskin letters tied with string. If they find them, I'll read every word.

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