

Memories of Midland

By Hugh Martin O'Rourke. This was written in 1962 as an addendum to a letter to the Cumberland Sunday Times.

"Families living in Midland during the first decade of this century. Many are still represented in the community, others have disappeared. This is the best of my memory, with apology to those I missed.

Alexander, Atkinson Baker, Barry, Beveridge, Blair, Broderick, Burns, Bush, Byrne, Canty, Campbell, Carpenter, Carroll, Cavanaugh, Cadden, Carskadon, Clark, Clise, Conlon, Coleman, Creegan, Creamer, Crowe, Cullen, Cunningham, Cummings, Dempsey, Dorsey, Duggan, Donoghue, Dunn, Eagan, Edwards, Fair, Farrell, Firlie, Flanagan, Fleming, Foreman, French, Glover, Grant, Graney, Creen, Grimes, Harbaugh, Hill, Hillary, Hughes, Izzit, Jackson, Johnson, Kamauff, Keenan, Kelly, Kenny, Keating, Kilduff, Koontz, Laffey, Lancaster, Leasure, Lemaster(laymaster), Lehman (Layman), Llewellyn, Lloyd, Maher, Manley, Manning, Matthew, Martin, Malloy, McMahan, McGee, McFarland, McGeady, McGuire, McGowan, McGreevy, McNeay (McNeery), McIntyre, McMudro, Melvin, McVeigh, Monahan, Muir, Murphy, Morgan, Neff, Noel, O'Brien, O'Neill, Ort, O'Rourke, O'Toole, Phillips, Poland, Powers, Reilly, Robertson, Rogers, Ross, Ryan, Sartori, Seymour, Sharp, Smith, Stevens, Stevenson, Stanton, Steiding, Stakem, Sulser, Thrasher, Thompson, Trezise, Ward, Williams, Winner, Winters, Wilson.

Come with me to Paradise Hill, hear the three tuned bells of Father Sartori's Chimes joyfully herald the coming of a frosty Christmas morning. Or hear the mournful toll of the deep "de profundis" bell broadcast the R.I.P. on the death of a parishioner. Be alarmed when the bell in the Firemen's Hall calls for help. Hear the muffled tone from the Methodist belfry, or the clang of the parochial and public school bells. See snow on the evergreen trees planted by my grandfathers around St. Joseph's Rectory. Hear the whistle of Ocean Mine signal the Valley whether or not there is work tomorrow, or know the grip of dread when it screams a banshee keening and wailing to the echoing hills that someone is injured or dead from a mine accident. Enjoy the cheerful tone of the C&P "hunchie" (passenger train) whistling its way to Cumberland and Piedmont. Hear the "tea kettle" puff-clang-whistle-rumble as a Cumberland and George's Creek locomotive hauls a train across the town via the big timber overhead trestle crossing the foot of O'Mara Avenue. Hear Larry Dunn's powerful voice rooting at a baseball game or calling the cows home from the high pasture a good half mile away.

The death of Tom McGuire, Westernport's former Postmaster, recalls his earlier brush with death from injury in a football game at Midland baseball park, in the 1920's. Go back to maybe 1908 and watch George Dailey of Piedmont make a homerun in one of the last games played on the old diamond where Belvedere Catholic Cemetery is now located. Recall huge, but stark-plain Latin cross, made of heavy timbers, which once stood in this cemetery. Remember the jamb-packed to overflowing fans crowding the special C&W electric "streetcars" on their way through town to a baseball game at Frostburg or Coney. Watch the numerous horse-drawn cabs, rigs, buggies, rigs, surreys go by on their way to excursions at High (Dan's) Rock. Recall the breathtaking wonder of the panorama the first, and time thereafter, when you saw the view from atop the rock.

Remember being told of good fishing on the upper reaches of George's Creek many years ago, and of the passenger pigeons flying over the valley in flocks of many thousands. Visit the log cabin birthplace of your sire (Martin O'Rourke) in Squirrel Neck Hollow, examining remains of a small canal once located along the run, and follow the old road crossing the hill to Woodland, Midlothian and Frostburg; or southward over to the big stone farmhouse and down to the older stone farmhouse on Knapp Meadow and into 'Coney. Visit the small dam, or wier, up Elk Lick Run, source of the town's water, and think of the big elk, or Wapiti, said to have once roamed our primal forest. Recall Eagle Rock near Oakland, Bear Creek northward, and the rugs you have seen of small black and cinnamon bears said to have been killed by hunters in the Stony River area. How many Virginia whitetail deer were bagged in our region during the season just past.

Recall Firlie's big log cabin farmhouse on Paradise Street; the three log cabins of the Three R's- Reillys, Ryans, Rourkes on Stump Hill; Peter Bush's farmhouse nearby; and old Billy McVeigh's log cabin homestead at the Tannery (Gilmore) outside Midland. Remember Sharp's stone farmhouse up on the road

to Pompey Smash (Vale Summit). Visit the Muir and Blair homes returning from a chestnut hunt or a swim in the small pools on Paradise Run below Llewellyn's farm. Help grandfather cut the hay or spray the potato plants, pick cherries, feed pigs and chickens, milk the cows. Remember the street lights, carbon filament electric bulbs, magneto phones, or your first Coca Cola and Ice Cream Soda, going to Izzit's for a dime's worth of homemade yeast, buying chewing gum at McIntyre's Grocery, your first automobile ride--with Jimmy Morton - in a big Oldsmobile or maybe Buick on Paradise St. and the Big Lane. Remember the footbridge across to Gabby Row, and the high plank we walked across the run to grandpa's on O'Mara Avenue. Nearby the swich-swish of the compressed air engine ,pumping water from the run to boilers at Ocean Mine. Watch miners' picks sharpened or mules shod at nearby Thrasher's Blacksmith Shop. Hear a band concert at the picnic ground dance pavilion near Ocean Mine. Watch parades on July 4th and St. Pat's Day. Help Dad make knitting needles and rug hooking frames, or frames for the quilting parties. Go with him to dig domestic coal from a small mine in the hillside at the upper end of Stevenson's Lane. Watch members of the Red Men's Lodge use McVeigh's tool house whilst making tom-toms and totem poles for a local celebration.

Remember the miners' torches that cold and dark night as they carried young Jimmy Fleming down Stevenson's and Laffey's Lane on a litter, taking him to a special train arranged for his journey to a Cumberland Hospital after buckshot destroyed his eyes in a hunting accident; and that he was the first from this district to learn reading by Braille. Remember the beautiful sunsets over Savage Mountain in the distance; and the big full moon coming up over Dan's Mountain. Sketch the timber tipple of Medicine Mine on the C&P spur, seen down the hill opposite the junction of Neff and Paradise runs. Remember watching the distant inclined plane of No. 9 behind the baseball park, the seemingly tiny cars going up and down on a thread of steel cable. You see your first movie at the nickelodeon downtown, get ice cream at Noel's Confectionery, look in several saloon windows as you go by. There's the Opera House and Dance Hall, the place for minstrel, vaudeville, balls and chivarees. There's the old slaughterhouse near the bridge across the creek to the churches. Go to see Doctor Carpenter or Doctor O'Neill.

Go to the small bank with your father, or to Tom Taylor Stakem's for a suit, or to John Kenny's for insurance. Remember Jim Cadden and Tom Conlon selling insurance or ICS home study courses. Get a Lord Fauntleroy suit form Andy Dick at Weinberg's in "Coney, then go to a Frostburg studio for a photograph. While there stop at Hitchin's or Pritchard's store, and on the way home visit Cavanaugh's in Upper Ocean, have the Woodland Schoolhouse pointed out on the way from there. On O'Mara Avenue, see the big oak where the banshee was seen and heard keening before the death of great-uncle Pat O'Rourke in his home alongside, maybe 60 years ago. Recall Kilduffs and others claiming to have seen fairies dancing in the moonlight on Knapp's Meadow when coming from church at St. Mary's in "Coney. Remember ghost stores about the old house where great-aunt Rose Glover once lived and much later the stories of ghostly organ music at the old Shaw Mansion in Moscow. catch crayfish and minnows in Paradise Run. Walk the old tram road up the hill behind McGreevy's and Thompson's places. Read Aesop, Arabian Nights and Geological Surveys or Father Stanton's history at paternal grandpa's library, with maybe Treasure Island and Shakespeare and some Irish books to boot. Some say you were born on Friday 13th, and had Jean or Fay Morgan (so help me Arthur and Merlin) as nursemaids; so you go over to Farrells or Morgans around the hill for a snack of new-baked currant bread with tea and scones, note for later the big walnut tree nearby.

Watch father clog and jig the old steps, recall that he once had dancing schools on the Creek and up the Potomac, Piedmont to Shaw and Elk Garden. Old timers tell me of he and my mother leading the Grand Marches, cake walks and such at the local fairs and balls. Hear him strop his fiddle for a western hoedown, then turn around and play a wild Irish or Scotch war song, or go serious into a Strauss waltz or an Italian Opera aria, or a symphonic overture. He taught me the words to most of the old English, Scotch, Welsh, Irish and American traditional songs. He could sing or play both Protestant and Catholic hymns, handed them down to myself and brothers. He didn't smoke, but took a drop of "the creature" occasionally, and got a bit tipsy on hot toddy at home when he and some friends celebrated a local political victory, or serving eggnog at Christmas. And I recall getting wee sips of beer from the fine Wexford glasses as it was served to visitors. He could be at home in a Spanish Grandee's hacienda in the Southwest, or sit along the road and talk with old Indians in Colorado. My knowledge of Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan came from him before I started to school. And my was was not really exceptional, for the coal miners of Ocean and Midland and elsewhere on the Creek were of a different background than those of the Kentucky-West Virginia mountaineer or hillbilly miners. I'm sure the Conlons, Stakems, Malloys ,Manleys, and other of their descendants in Cumberland will confirm this for you.

Read the "funny papers" in the Midland of 1910. Faraway Moses in the Pennsylvania Grit. Cumberland and other city papers carried Happy Hooligan, Clumsy Claude, Hairbreath Harry, Little Nemo, Crazy Kat, Officer Crust, Captain and the Katchenjammer Kids, Jiggs & Maggie, Buster Brown, Slim Jim. Cartoons were often reminiscent of the later classics of Williams (Out Our Way, etc.) My father and several others were experts at fancy pen work; could make excellent pencil sketches, sign painting was done with artistic care. Henry McVeigh painted several religious and scenic pictures with oils, exceptionally good. George Conlon learned to be a top rank sculptor. The Creek towns were full of talent--still are. Those totem poles aforementioned equaled anything I've seen in that line, and I understand some of them became exhibits at several big city museums.

Good silver and china was on the sideboard buffets or displayed in closets, used with fine linens from Ireland and Wexford glassware were saved for visitors or used on special occasions. Wine was sometimes purchased, often homemade, but really good. Berries, fruit trees and vegetable gardens were common. Preserves, jellies and jams; Pickles sauerkraut, buckwheat flour from Garrett Count, turkey for Thanksgiving and Christmas, sometimes a goose. Pumpkin pie, cranberry sauce, bayberry candles, real holly, local Christmas trees. We knew about snowshoes and skis and toboggans as well as Eastern bobsleds and ice skates, of high-seated sleds for girls and racy steel-shod ones for the boys ,and the early Flexible Flyers. Most people owned their homes and kept them in good repair. chess and checkers were played, as were the various card games. There were excursions in the big horse drawn sleds, some had cutters, sleight bells on all. There were hay rides, swimming parties (I don't recall any private pools), pool and billiard rooms. And some of the older Irish and Anglo-Irish had ridden to hounds in foxhunting; here bred collies for fun and hounds for hunting coon, rabbits, possums, etc.

The Creek people speak a good english, but often clip their words, burr the r's, brog the sentences. Old English, Welsh, Irish and Scotch twists and pronunciations. Awr for r, never awh. Bits of brogue. It is hard to define, but recognizable. You hear it in Uniontown, Morgantown, Fairmont, and Wilmerding, Turtle Creek, Allequippa and Pittsburgh--places where many of their kin now live and work, was well as down Luke way. But surprisingly enough one doesn't hear much of it in Cumberland. How do you account for this? Dinna ye ken a bit of it, me lad? Caow for cow. Haouse for house. Ruff for roof. Whertya for "where did you". There are better examples, I wish I could remember.

Few Creek people had money, most of them had hard sledding financially, worked hard for a living. Ask the Conlons and others how they managed such a good life. They were thrifty in a sense, spendthrift and generous at the same time. How did they balances these and come out even or ahead? But there is one thing they all agreed upon--"Take care of the schools first, and the churches and homes will reap the benefit.

H.M.O'R. (Hugh Martin O'Rourke)



[Home](#)