

Traveling Companion: Rooted in history

Fr. Michael Tracey

They arrived at my home in Ireland one afternoon while I was on vacation. I had never met them before. Locals referred to them as “Yanks.” They were in search of their roots. After a brief introduction, they remarked, “I think we are related to you.” Being a little cynical, I had my doubts but I was willing to listen to the evidence, if they had any.

They introduced themselves as Henegan’s from Dayton, Ohio. This was Dennis and Patti’s first trip to Ireland. They had brought a neighbor who lived nearby with them to give credence to their search.

As one who had done some research on my own family tree already, I was aware of certain branches and offshoots which connected us with a plethora of neighbors. The name was familiar although its spelling had changed. This was due to an emigrant who could only pronounce a name and the transcriber at Ellis Island, wrote it as he heard it sounded.

Over a cup of tea, we chatted for a while. I discovered that Patti had done extensive research on the Henegan family tree and had connected them with my family. The connection between both families came from my great grandmother’s side. Through such a discovery, we were able to add another branch to the family tree.

Dennis and Patti left to explore some of the surroundings, the cemeteries, old church ruins and family research centers. Some days later, they arrived back with a laptop, cameras and more questions.

As they left, they invited our extended family to join them for a drink with all the other newly discovered relatives at a local five-star hotel. Gradually, people arrived at the hotel. Some gathered in clusters to discuss family ties and connections; others hovered over a laptop that connected generations in an orderly fashion. Some gathered at a table where a pedigree family tree overflowed over the table. People pointed to and discussed ancestors long buried beneath the clay. Others sipped slowly a beer or something lighter. Towards the end of the evening, it was time for pictures. Digital cameras flashed as various branches of the extended family tree were pictured with the American hosts.

We continued to discuss the newly found relationship, as we headed for home, the midnight hour fast approaching.

I discovered some interesting insights into the evening and whole experience. First of all, I had noticed some boys who had come with their parents for the evening. They were probably eight to ten years old. They sat on the floor together, enjoying their soft drinks, munching on some hot French fries and some salted nuts. They were in their own world, immune to the history that was being made and discussed around them. It was obvious that their perspective was much different than the adults. They were not interested in who their ancestors were or who they were related to. They probably saw the American couple who brought everyone together as just some strangers who happened to be interested in silly things but, at least, who gave them some free drinks.

I began to think back to my own pre-teenage and teenage years. I, too, wasn’t interested in who my ancestors were. They were all “old” people who didn’t understand us or who simply lived a long time ago.

At that time in our lives, in our invincible and eternal youth mentality, we do not care about our rootedness. We are more interested in the immediate and the gratification it will bring. It is only much later on that we begin to show an interest in our own family history. So often, the interest comes too late. It comes when the elders in our families are deceased and we miss forever their story, their history and their connectedness to us. In an age of great mobility when we move from place to place, roots become skin deep. We loose contact with the very people who can anchor us in our family history – our grandparents. As kids, we played in tree houses in our own fantasy worlds. Maybe, we need to climb through the real branches and stories of our own family tree in order to discover, not only our history but also our soul.