

## SISTER MARY ELLEN CURTIN, CSJ

**M**y great grandparents, Charles and Catherine Ryan Curtin, came to the US around 1850 and settled in Northern New York State in the Town of Clinton, which later became the town of Chateaugay, after the Chateaugay River that flowed from Canada into the two lakes in this area.

Fourteen families came from Parish Abington in East Limerick, Ireland, now the town of Murroe. Charles and Catherine, who were married in this parish in 1847 and had two children, Edward and Mary, born there, worked in servitude at an English manor.

Members of these 14 families came to Chateaugay at different times, during the time of “the Great Famine.” Most of them arrived through the port of Montreal and headed south across the border. Some came through New York and traveled north, where they were told there was land available. My great grandfather was a finisher, a cabinet-maker, but became a potato farmer.

Charles and Catherine had 11 children, nine born in Chateaugay. When they became of age and married, most of them moved to the area near Denver, CO, to work on the railroad or in the mines. The two youngest, Thomas, my paternal grandfather, and Michael bought land adjoining their family farm and stayed in Chateaugay to raise their families.

When I read the family genealogy, there was a lot of intermarriage among the 14 families, so I have many double cousins. My Grandmother Curtin was a Higgins, and several Curtins married Higgins and several Ryans married Ryans, Higgins and Curtins. Both my great grandmothers were Ryan’s . It would be fun to meet my cousins to see how many ways we are related.

When I look at the only picture we have of Charles and Catherine, I see a sweet, demure woman who endured a great deal. After bearing 11 children, most of them went to Colorado and California, and she never saw them again. In the photo there are 3 young grandchildren who were returned to Chateaugay for her to raise, when their mother died and their father wasn’t able to care for them.

There are not many stories told of what Ireland was like for them or what their trip was like getting to Chateaugay, but what I glean from knowing my Dad’s aunts, uncles and cousins were clearly the values of education, love of family, independence, hard work and having a deep faith. They were risk-takers and had a sense of adventure. These families were very instrumental in establishing St. Patrick’s Parish Church in Chateaugay. From this small town, many went from their one-room school house to the University of Michigan, including my Dad and his brother.

Several years ago, I was traveling in Colorado and stopped at a museum depicting the area of the late 1800s and early 1900s. I was amazed to see a plaque for a James O’Neil, who was married to Catherine Curtin, my great-aunt. He was a sheriff for this territory and dearly loved.



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My great aunt, Kate Higgins, who lived to be 100, worked in New Rochelle, NY, as a milliner, in the early 1900s. She was an amazing woman with a great sense of adventure, traveling to six World Fairs, and she crossed the country on the first Transcontinental Railway.

As I reflect on my father's family, as well as my own siblings and cousins, there is a strain of being contemplative and rather solitary as well as living simply and frugally. As my father often would say to us, "We don't need that!" Visiting the old Curtin farm was fascinating to me as a child where there was no indoor plumbing and only spring water that flowed in a back kitchen. My grandmother still cooked on the wood stove and used a flat iron. We took heated bricks to bed for warmth.

What I feel I have inherited from this clan is a deep faith, love of learning, independence, being a strong woman, love of earth/land, being contemplative, having a sense of adventure and doing what was needed to create a life of purpose and meaning.

