

Genealogy Basics – Why I Like to Attend Family Reunions

By Joe Petrie

BACKGROUND:

Countless genealogy books and articles advise the readers to start their genealogy research by contacting relatives to collect oral history. It is how I started. It worked for me! In addition, I believe that all researchers should continue the process forever. Reunions like any other family meetings are useful to change vital items in one's research that are blank or incorrect. At weddings, wakes and funerals, I ask whether I can call or Email later to solicit information.

The latest opportunity gather information was the Thomas Francis McGrath Family Reunion last month.

My wife Ellen is a McGrath. Her maternal grandmother was Ellen (McGrath) O'Brien of Ballyphilip East, Kilcockan, Waterford County. After she married Robert O'Brien, they lived in Fermoy, Cork County, and in Youghal, Cork County. During World War I, Ellen and Robert (and 3 children) lived in England while he was serving in France.

We have been gathering McGrath information for over 40 years. Ellen found out that she was a McGrath about 40 years ago. (Our children were in grammar school.) Father John Joseph McGrath, SJ, her mother's first cousin introduced himself one afternoon. His family had been searching for Ellen and her siblings since the 1940s. Because Ellen's widower father was estranged from his late wife's family, his children never learned about their mother's relatives until after he died.

About 25 years ago, we visited my wife's O'Brien family in Youghal, County Cork, Ireland. Ellen's late Uncle Tom O'Brien took us to Glendine RC Church in Waterford County where his parents, Robert O'Brien and Ellen McGrath, were married in 1910. Later that day, he took us to the Knockanore RC Church in Waterford County where his mother Ellen McGrath O'Brien (1888 – 1964) is buried with her McGrath parents William and Margaret (Veale) McGrath and some of William's and Margaret's children. That evening, at a Family Reunion, a "Welcome Home Party" for Ellen, Uncle Tom and a nephew provided a copy of their genealogy research. Since then, we have collected more oral history from Tom, his children and cousins.

In addition, we collected genealogy for Ellen McGrath's siblings and their descendants. The easiest task was collecting information for her brothers, John Joseph and William. They immigrated to Massachusetts in the early 1900s. Those who remained in Ireland are difficult due to the paucity of digital information.

I have been able to validate most of the oral history using primary and secondary sources. Using on-line Irish databases in FamilySearch, Ancestry Library, National Archives of Ireland and National Library of Ireland, we have validated most of the oral history. In addition, for John Joseph and William (the Irish Diaspora), we have collected more vital information from US Federal Censuses, Massachusetts Passenger and Crew Lists, Massachusetts and Federal Naturalization Declarations and Petitions, and WW I and WW II Draft Registration Records.

Finally, we have collected information on Peter Veale, Margaret (Veale) McGrath's only brother. Peter appears to have been the first relative to arrive in Boston. John Joseph McGrath traveled to Boston with a Veale Aunt. He stayed with Peter Veale, in Roxbury.

INTRODUCTION:

In November 2017, my wife and I attended the Thomas F. (Tom) McGrath Family Reunion as guests of Paul Michael McGrath and his wife Karen. Thomas F. McGrath was born in Massachusetts in 1909 to John Joseph McGrath and Bridge Cuddihy. Tom was a first cousin of my wife's mother, Helena (Lena) O'Brien. Tom met Lena at the dock when Lena arrived in Boston in 1936 for her second and last immigration. Earlier, Tom's father, John Joseph McGrath, met his niece, Lena, at the dock in 1930.

We were invited to the Reunion by Paul Michael McGrath, one of Thomas F's grandsons. It was an honor to be invited to the Reunion especially because my wife is not one of Thomas F. McGrath's direct descendants.

Thomas F's son Uncle Tom is in his 80s. He calls me the McGrath Family Historian. I met Uncle Tom's nephews, Paul Michael and Jack McGrath after a seminar that I gave at the Irish Cultural Center in Canton Massachusetts. Earlier that week, Paul Michael contacted his Uncle Tom for help with planning a trip to Waterford County, Ireland. Uncle Tom suggested that Paul Michael contact me because in his view I am the Family Historian. That honor from Uncle Tom was a first for me! It is much appreciated.

Beginning last fall, I prepared multiple iterations of material for Paul Michael and his seven siblings to take on their trip to Ireland. Ellen and I met Paul Michael, his wife Karen and her parents in their home in Naples, Florida. Also, we met Paul Michael's sister Patty who lives in Naples. Her husband apologized for not meeting us. He was golfing!

After their trip, I submitted the final version of the material that I gave Paul Michael for publication in Ireland Reaching Out. Ireland Reaching Out publishes material on the Irish Diaspora in their XO Chronicles Electronic Magazine. My material about John Joseph McGrath is available on:

www.irelandxo.com/ireland-xo/history-and-genealogy/ancestor-database/john-joseph-mcgrath

The John Joseph McGrath material in Ireland XO Chronicles was my first. There are six more that were published. The material about my mother-in-law, Helena (Lena) O'Brien Connolly (one of John Joseph's nieces), is available on:

www.irelandxo.com/ireland-xo/history-and-genealogy/ancestor-database/helena-obrien

One paragraph was left out. Helena (Lena) passed away in 1944 leaving her husband and 3 children under 5 years old. Most important is that her legacy is her descendants!

PREPARATIONS BEFORE THE REUNION:

I always take a pen and a pad of paper.

I printed out Thomas F's Pedigree Chart. I sent it on a Rich Text File (RTF) file to Paul Michael. I gave a print-out to Paul Michael at the Reunion.

Also, I printed out Thomas F's Modified Register Report with an Index. I sent a RTF file to Paul Michael. I gave the Register Report to Paul Michael at the Reunion. I printed out the Index as third document for Paul Michael.

ACTIVITIES AT THE REUNION:

Paul Michael introduced Ellen and me by telling the attendees about our help with his and his siblings' trip to the Knockanore RC Church to visit his great, great grandparents' grave. A photo of the 8 living children taken in front of the Church is on the last page of the Ireland Reaching Out material for his great grandfather, John Joseph McGrath.

Paul Michael had gathered more information on the families on the Register Report. He promised to send it.

One great grandson discovered that his family was not on the Modified Register Report's Index. He had researched his father's family. His mother was a McGrath but he never researched her family. I promised to help him with both families.

Paul Michael asked all of the McGraths to join him for a photo that he is planning to send to the organizers of the Irish McGrath Clan Gathering in Waterford County in 2019. I am certain that Paul Michael will attend. I am hoping that he learns where the Irish McGraths settled in Waterford County. Also, I hope he learns where they were from when they immigrated to Ireland. I suspect that it was Scotland or some other part of the British Isles.

SUMMARY:

We met Paul Michael's Uncle John McGrath.

We met Paul Michael's brother Steven. There are only 4 living siblings that we have not met.

We met more of Ellen's McGrath relatives.

We collected a lot of information on Ellen's McGrath relatives.

We have been promised more information.

We plan to see Paul Michael and his wife Karen in Naples Florida this winter.

Most important was the fact Ellen talked to cousins that she had met years ago and had not talked to lately. In fact, she is planning a luncheon with Ellen's sister and a McGrath cousin to catch up with her and her family. This is a long overdue MUST DO item.

Finally, special thanks to Paul Michael McGrath and his Uncle Tom McGrath for helping us gather more information about Ellen's McGrath family in the United States!

Your corrections, comments and suggestions are appreciated. Please Email me at:

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Please note that Friends of Irish Research is the repository for my published genealogy articles in the *Newfoundland Ancestor*; and in *EZINE*, the electronic magazine of the Cape Breton Genealogy and Historical Association. (See friendsofirishresearch.org; specifically the Tabs for Publications and Joe's Free Web Sites.) I am the author of the Genealogy Basics Series.