

TOPIC VII: The Amazing Potato and the History of Ireland

INTERDISCIPLINARY MIDDLE GRADES (4-8) PACKAGE

TITLE: The O'Connell Family Comes to New York

AIM 7.4: Why did people migrate from Ireland to the United States during the Great Irish Famine?

TEACHER BACKGROUND: In 1997, the people of Ireland and of Irish descent around the world observed the 150th anniversary of the worst year (1847) of the Great Irish Famine, a catastrophe precipitated by a fungus that destroyed the potato harvests of 1845, 1846, 1848 and 1849. To mark the Great Irish Famine commemoration in New York State, the state legislature voted that study of the famine in Ireland be included in the Human Rights curriculum required in the state's public schools. The curriculum already includes the study of slavery in the Americas and the European Holocaust.

The consequences of the Great Irish Famine altered more than the course of Irish history; the Irish diaspora changed the shape of world history, especially that of the United States, Canada, Australia and England. In the 1990 federal census, 44 million Americans voluntarily reported their ethnicity as Irish.

New York State is especially proud of its Irish heritage. In 1855, 26% of the population of Manhattan was born in Ireland. By 1900, 60% of the population was of Irish descent. Today, thousands of New Yorkers trace their ancestry to famine era immigrants who helped develop the infrastructure, economy, and social and political institutions of our state.

This story was prepared by the staff of the Great Irish Famine Curriculum Guide project to introduce students to the famine and reasons for emigration. It is a based-on-fact account of a fictional family, told from the perspective of a thirteen year old girl named Bridget O'Connell. The story begins in County Cork, Ireland in the winter of 1846-1847. It ends with their arrival in the Five Points neighborhood of New York City.

AIM 7.4: Why did people migrate from Ireland to the United States during the Great Irish Famine?

ASSESSMENT:

- Students will demonstrate their understanding of the impact of the Great Irish Famine on the people of Ireland through participation in group discussion, completion of activity sheets and presentations in class.
- Students will demonstrate their understanding of the Great Irish Famine on the people of Ireland through completion of individual projects.
- Students will demonstrate their understanding of immigration to the United States in different historical eras.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: Has anyone here ever moved to a new home? Why do people move? Was anyone here born in another country/ Parents/ Grandparents/ Friends? Why do people move to another country?

TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY: We will read the story of a thirteen year old girl and her family. In the story she discusses why her family moved from Ireland to the United States. The story is a work of fiction but it is based on fact? What does it mean that a story is fiction? What does it mean that a story is based on fact?

ACTIVITY: Read and discuss, "The O'Connell Family Comes to America." Key questions include: What was the O'Connell home like in Ireland? What was life like for Bridget in Ireland? How did the O'Connells cook their "praties"? What happened to change life in Ireland in the fall of 1845? What did people do to survive the hard times? Why were many Irish angry at the English? What was the trip like to the United States? ? How were the Irish treated when they arrived in the United states and Canada?

SUMMARY QUESTION: Why did the O'Connell family migrate from Ireland to the United States? If your family had lived in Ireland during the Great Irish Famine, would you have wanted to move to the United States? Why

HOMEWORK: Imagine the year is 1847 and you are an immigrant from Ireland. Write a letter to family and friends left behind in Ireland. In your letter, explain if you think they should move to the United States.

APPLICATION: Bridget O'Connell said: "Sometimes our new life was sweet and sometimes it was bitter. But it was never Ireland." In your opinion, why do many immigrants agree with Bridget O'Connell's view of immigration?

- If you were living in New York, would you have contributed to famine relief? Explain.

REFLECTIONS: After reading the story, students from Cecelia Goodman's fifth grade class collected money as part of Trick-or Treat for UNICEF. Money can be sent to any part of the world designated by the class. Students in the class decided how they wanted the money they raised allocated. Students can also raise money or collect supplies for emergency disaster relief or volunteer to help at a homeless shelter.

Rachel Gaglione at IS 119 in Queens had her students create dioramas based on the story "The O'Connell Family Comes to America." Cecelia Goodman and Jennie Chacko and Michael Maiglow at IS 292 in Brooklyn had their students design big books based on the story. Goodman's class presented their big book to kindergarten children. The intermediate school students read to their four-year-old reading buddies from a neighborhood pre-school program.

ACTIVITY SHEET: The O'Connell Family Comes to New York

Instructions: As you read this story, consider the following questions. Be prepared to write your answers at the end of the story.

- 1- What was the O'Connell home like in Ireland?
- 2- What was life like for Bridget in Ireland?
- 3- How did the O'Connells cook their "praties"?
- 4- What happened to change life in Ireland in the fall of 1845?
- 5- What did people do to survive the hard times?
- 6- Why were many Irish angry at the English?
- 7- What was the trip like to the United States?
- 8- How were the Irish treated when they arrived in the United States and Canada?

Word Bank:

dhia dhuit - hello

thatched roof - a roof made from bundles of straw

praties - potatoes

abbey- a church that is part of a religious community

stone - an English or Irish measure equal to 14 pounds

English Parliament- Made laws for England and Ireland. Similar to Congress in the United States

górta mór - great hunger

blight- a disease caused by a fungus that destroyed potatoes

keening- crying

bog- damp lowlands not useful for farming

"Táim ag imeacht thar sáile" - a saying that means, "I'm going over the sea." People said it when they left Ireland to live in another land.

"Dhia dhuit!" Hello!

My name is Bridget O'Connell. This is my story.

In the winter of 1846 I lived in County Cork in Ireland with my Da, my Mammy, my younger brothers Danny and Michael, my baby sister Peggy, and our pig. I was thirteen years old.

This book tells the story about why my family, the O'Connells, decided to leave Ireland, how we arrived in the United States, and the life we found in our new city and country. Sometimes our new life was sweet and sometimes it was bitter. But it was never Ireland.

Before I begin our tale, I need to tell you more about Ireland, the greenest and most beautiful place on earth. Our home was near Ballincollig, a village in the Lee valley not far from Cork city.

Our family lived in a one-room cabin with a straw or thatched roof. Our cabin was one of a group of cabins huddled together near a crossroads. Our little fields of potatoes and grain surrounded our little village. We called the potatoes -- praties.

My friends Maggie MacCarthy and Nora Murphy lived in our village in little cabins like ours. We all went to a hedge school, a school that met outdoors in fine weather where we learned to read and write. We also learned a little Latin and our numbers. The older ones learned a little Greek.

We spoke Irish, our own language, instead of English in our village. Would you like to learn some Irish? You probably already know a few words.

"Colleen" means "little girl." A "Shanty" is an "old house." "Galore" means "lots."

As the eldest child, I had many responsibilities. I worked hard to take care of the little ones in the family. I also went for water to cook our praties and for washing. Water had to be boiled in a big black pot over the fire.

I did not mind the hard work. We had our special days that brought us all together. We danced at the crossroads. The boys played a game called hurling. They use sticks carved of ash wood to hit a ball and score a goal. On the feast of St. Brigit we went to the abbey at Ovens to a pattern, a gathering to say prayers and then to celebrate.

In the old days we Irish owned our land, but by 1800 most of our land was owned by English landlords. Some did not even live in Ireland but rented their land to other people. My Da worked for our landlord. He was paid eight pence a day when he worked, but he wasn't needed every day. We had a small patch of land where we raised oats and potatoes. It was the praties that we ate.

Potatoes are good for you and we ate a lot of them. My Da ate about fourteen pounds of potatoes a day. We children ate about six pounds a day. In Ireland we call fourteen pounds of potatoes a "stone." If a stone is fourteen pounds, how many stones do you weigh?

The praties were simply boiled in the big black pot. We fed the skins to the pigs. When we had a cow we drank buttermilk with our praties. Sometimes we added a little fish to flavor them. This was not often because the landlords owned the rights to fish in the rivers and we were not allowed to catch them.

We thought all of this was unfair. When the English Parliament made Ireland part of the United Kingdom in 1800, they said Ireland was an equal part of the kingdom. But we felt like we were treated as a colony.

The United States once belonged to England too. Many Irish people wanted an independent Ireland, just like the people in America had their own country. Irish men and women who had gone to America fought in the American Revolutionary War. After we saw the Americans win their independence, we tried to have our own rebellion in 1798. We fought hard, but the English won, and our Ireland became part of their United Kingdom.

Before the great hunger, what we call the górtá mór (gore-ta more), life was hard. It was extra rough while we waited for the praties to grow. Some years the crop wasn't very good and that meant people had to sell there things to buy food.

Sometimes my Da walked to the big farms in County Tipperary to work during the harvest to make a little extra money. Because of hard work, our family always got by. We also knew that even if the harvest was bad, the praties would come back the next year and everything would be alright.

But starting in the fall of 1845 everything seemed to changed. The praties rotted in the group because of a fungus. It was called a blight and it caused a horrible smell. The next years people prayed for good harvests, but the potato crop failed again and again. The praties rotted in the ground in 1845, 1846, 1848 and 1849.

We tried our best to survive in the fall of 1845. We searched the fields for potatoes that had not been ruined by the blight. My Da sold our pig so we had money to buy oatmeal. Mammy went to town and sold some of our household goods. All winter Da and Mammy worried because there was not enough money for both food and to the rent.

Times were so hard we had to eat the seed potatoes we were saving to plant in the spring. My Da had to buy seed potatoes to sow for the 1846 crop. We planted them, as we always did, on St. Patrick's Day.

As the summer came to Ballincollig, we all hoped for a good harvest. The fields were green again, and every one in Ireland was hopeful. Then the unexpected happened. The blight returned and field after field turned black. People cried, "Heaven protect us!"

A second hungry summer meant famine. There was an extreme scarcity of food. Oatmeal and other food became more and more expensive. Some shop keepers took advantage of the food shortage to raise their prices. Others gave us credit at a very high price. We called them "gombeen" men. The people hated them.

Yellow corn came from America, but if people did not cook it properly, they got very sick. We had to sell our new crop of oats to get money to pay our rent. People sold everything they had to buy food.

There was some work government work on the roads for the poorest men, but they said my Da was too well off to get the work. Maggie McCarthy's baby brother died of fever. I can still hear his mother, my mammy and the other women keening (crying) over him.

Soon so many were dying that our people grew silent. No longer did villagers gather to honor our dead and say good-by.

If we weren't suffering enough, the winter of 1846-47 was the worst in memory. There was icy rain and high winds. We rarely have snow in Ireland, but that winter it snowed too.

The O'Connell family was cold and hungry, but we were better off than some of our neighbors. Not one of us was sick. Most important, we were together. Nora Murphy's father went off to County Tipperary to look for work, and we never saw him again.

We were able to pay our rent on the first day of May in 1847. Because there was a famine, some landlords reduced the rent or gave people more time to pay. Some landlords become poor themselves when they helped tenants by creating work or by buying food.

When families could not pay the rent they were put out of their houses by soldiers. While evicted families stood in the yard, soldiers set fire to the thatch roof and then knocked down the rest of the building.

Many people found temporary shelter at the edge of a bog or in a ditch along the road. People wandered the countryside begging. We heard frightening stories of people dying alone and hopeless from starvation or fever.

It is hard to believe but even while we were hungry and starving, boat loads of food were leaving Ireland. In some towns there were riots when people attacked shops of wagons that were bringing our grain to ships bound for England.

Maggie McCarthy's brother Michael and some of the lads took a few bags of oats from a cart traveling on the Cork road. They were arrested and imprisoned at Spike Island until they were sent to a place called Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania).

While Ireland starved, the English government did too little and they did it too late. The government and their newspapers liked to tell the Irish people that Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. But when famine came, they told us that it was up to us to take care of ourselves.

Fortunately, there were good people who came forward to help us. In Ireland, we especially remember the Quakers (the Society of Friends) who organized famine relief. They opened soup kitchens all over the country where the poor people were served a nutritious soup and bread.

Quakers in England sent aid and American Quakers organized a relief campaign that brought contributions from all over the United States. School children sent their pennies. Even the prisoners at Sing Sing in New York State contributed. The Choctaw Indians of Oklahoma who had their own story of sorrow and suffering collected money and sent it to Ireland.

In the spring of 1847, the only relief that the government offered was the poorhouse. There were poorhouses built before the famine in every district in Ireland (and in England too). They were designed for the old, the sick and the mentally disabled. They were almost like jails. When the famine came, they became very overcrowded and disease spread quickly among the residents. The worst thing about the poorhouses was that families were separated when they entered. Men lived in one wing, women in another, and their children were kept in still another area. People were rarely permitted to see their loved ones. My Mammy said we would never go to the poorhouse. Whatever happened, we would always stay together.

There was no blight in the summer of 1847, but people had been too poor and too distrustful to plant much of a harvest. When we got through the summer, my Da decided that we would take what was left of our meager savings and go to America.

Irish families who could leave sought passage to England, to Canada and to the United States. Some, who had family in Australia, planned to go there.

Our neighbors were leaving Ireland for places like Quebec, St. John and Liverpool. Nora Murphy's mother was taking her and her sisters to live with her uncle's family in Boston. Maggie, Nora and I had heard of America but we didn't know anything about those places. We were afraid that we would never see each other again.

One morning our family left the little cabin that had been our home in Ballincollig. We walked into Cork and on to Queenstown where we boarded a big ship to take us to New York. We stood on the deck watching the coast of Ireland slip away. Someone sang "Táim ag imeacht thar sáile" (Taw may im-mucht har saul-ya), "I'm going over the sea." Mammy cried, but we were too excited to be sad.

The boat trip took three weeks. When we got out into the Atlantic and were forced to stay below deck, the trip became a nightmare.

We were all seasick. We ate hard biscuits and drank water stored in barrels. There was no water for washing and no sanitation. People got sick living in crowded quarters and ship fever spread from family to family. Mammy and Peggy caught the fever. Mammy got so weak that we thought she would die. Thank God she survived. Our little Peggy did not.

Many people died on that boat. There was no Catholic priest with us, so there could be no funerals. The captain said a prayer and the bodies were buried at sea. Our little Peggy was so young and innocent. We know her soul went right to heaven.

Finally we arrived in New York at a pier in the East River. There were so many ships there, and we had never seen so many people. People came on the ship and

looked at Mammy. They decided she was getting better and could leave the ship. I later learned that many people who had gone to Canada arrived with fever and were kept in fever sheds on an island in the St. Lawrence River.

My Da found us a place to live in New York near where our ship landed. The neighborhood was called the Five Points. It was full of people like ourselves-- poor Irish men, women and children who arrived in New York to make a new life. There were crowds of people living together in small spaces. They tell us it will be very hot here in the summer. My Da found work as a laborer. He works long days at dangerous work, but he tells us that he can save and take us to a better place.

People aren't very friendly to us here. They say the Irish live in shacks with their pigs, have too many children, and let us run wild. They say we are dirty.

We are doing the best we can and we will show New Yorkers what fine citizens the Irish will be when we have a chance to work and to go to school.

We have heard that the Irish in New Orleans have it much harder. The work on a canal there is very dangerous and there is a lot of disease. In Philadelphia, people fought the Irish in the streets, and in Boston there are signs saying "NO IRISH NEED APPLY." My Da says we have the best chance in New York.

Whatever our problems, the O'Connell family is here and we are glad to be in America. We are together and we have hope for the future.