

## SHANTIES OF IRISHTOWN

“Irishtown” was a loosely bounded, undetermined area, from whence came sons and daughters of above average accomplishments. To put down a name would be unforgivable, for who am I to put myself as judge; and if my poor mind had left one out, I’d rue it to the end of me.

Irishtown was the mother of priests, ministers, statesmen, doctors, lawyers, dentists, newspapermen, athletes, and just plain mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons whose character was their accomplishment. Was he merchant, lawman, bartender or professional gambler, he was judged by his character and was a respected part of the community for that accomplishment. Some of them, due to their means of livelihood, were unacceptable to some moral standards, but to my mind they practiced a code of honesty, truthfulness, and charity that was expected and returned from those who knew them.

The hub of Irishtown, which is open to dispute, argument, and even violent objection, is the area in which my wife and I were born and raised. We have raised our brood, but “Thanks be to God,” our house is still “Home” to eighty relations of our two families. Wealth? Affluence? We are blessed. This area contained a brewery, tannery, pottery, flour mill, ice factory, livery, dayapple house, railroad sidings, court house, city building, city and county jails, iron and nail mill, slaughter houses, depots, freight house, hotels, wharf, race track, blacksmith shops, wholesale and retail stores, saloons, and perhaps other things my poor memory has neglected. Although a predominately Catholic community, with Saint Lawrence O’Toole and Saint Joseph Churches and their schools, there were two public schools, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational, Baptist, Wesley,

Lutheran churches, and some free-lance Holyrollers holding services periodically in a tent. The Public Library was in the Memorial Hall. Stage shows were held in the Opera House in the Masonic Building. I may have gotten a little out-of-bounds; maybe rode the electric street car around the loop through Goose-point and through the downtown district from Irishtown. This was the background for the Shanties.

We had three Shanties within a three block radius: Parnells, McMahons, Caseys. My brother Dave belonged to both McMahons and Caseys. I was a little brother the bigger boys nicknamed "Tail" until I was big enough to rate a big pack of chewing tobacco instead of a sample pack which we earned by distributing samples and advertising posters. As were the Irishtown boundaries, the Shanty membership was flexible. The Shanties were in converted summer kitchens that had been donated by the parents and located near the kitchen door of their respective houses. The thought just occurred to me that this location was very handy to the eyes of the Matriarch of the family, and although I never knew it to happen, in easy reach of the "Old Gentleman" of the family. They were a sort of "escape from parents" projects where teenagers could play cards, smoke or chew tobacco. I do not remember ever having seen whiskey, beer, nor card playing for money in an Irishtown shanty; nor an off-color sex story, nor indecent or profane language uttered. The few fights we had were with bare fists and quickly forgotten.

One escapade, of which I never did get the details, occurred at McMahon's shanty. One or more shanty members had noticed a turkey being fattened at Al Murdock's home who was one of the more affluent residents of the community. The turkey somehow found its way into the shanty's coal heater and cook stove. I, being

merely a little brother, was not admitted to the inner circle, to which my brother Dave belonged. I had a still tongue but big ears. A neighborhood boy, who was not very adept in criminal practice, came by our house and yelled to my brother Dave, “Hey, Dave, the turkey is about done.”

Our wise old mother, who had probably noticed some suspicious actions, whispers, guilt imposed mien, or maybe it was just plain intuition that caused her to take note of the message. And, being on the alert to forestall any actions of her offspring to violate the rules of her strict “bringing-up” asked my brother Dave the meaning of the message she had overheard. He, being no match for his good old Irish Mother, and never having learned to lie, was forced to admit his implication in the forthcoming turkey feed. We were both confined to the house.

I have no doubt that this incident and other related incidental actions by other shanty members, who were under the watchful eyes of their parents, was the source of Al Murdock’s having solved the mystery of the disappearing turkey.

I never did learn the details of who ate the turkey nor of the settlement.

I do know that the parents of the offenders gave them a more severe punishment than would have been given by the law. And after their period of penance they had a better chance of gaining back their self respect. And they gained three mutual friends. Al Murdock was not only charitable; his shrewd handling of the affair gave proof of why he owned and lived in the big house.

Another incident of neither rhyme nor reason occurred when the McMahan and the Casey shanties joined forces in a raid on the Parnell shanty. There was one wilder than average member, Hughie Dugan, who occasionally met with the Casey shanty gang

who had a grudge with the Parnell gang through some fancied insult by them. Hughie was not as sociable as the usual run of the neighborhood boys. He lived on the outskirts of Irishtown and was pretty much of a loner. He had had a leg cut off from hopping a freight train, which led to his being accepted, through sympathy, by the less precocious boys of the neighborhood. His influence, or boredom, who knows what, led to the idea of a half dozen or so a mixture of McMahon-Casey shanty members invading the Parnell shanty.

We crept through the brewery lot to the vicinity of the enemy shanty like Indians we'd read about in the Buffalo Bill Wild West stories. We watched in spellbound fright as Hughie scrambled onto the low roofed shanty with the noisy awkwardness induced by his wood leg and immature body. He quickly dropped something (I learned later it was green grass, with an idea of smoking them out). Then he fell off the roof to join the rest of us in our hurried departure. There was never a sign of the enemy during nor after our fearless attack,

Next day we were all playing ball in Ebberts field, choosing up sides from all three shanty members or other neighborhood kids.

I would like to point out that of all the hairbrained acts performed by the kids in my neighborhood, I never knew one to be charged with a crime in a court of law. We had our differences and fights to the point of exhaustion, but our punishment was big lips, bloody noses, black eyes, and worst of all having to go home and face our parents, especially the Old Lady. A cat-o-nine tails is nothing compared to a soft spoken tongue lashing.

I'll never live long enough to forget, and I'll be forever thankful for what my Mother did for me when she discovered I had stolen a small ten cent rubber ball from a store. She scrubbed my face, put on her clean apron, and away we went, hand in hand, to the store. Following her orders, I carried the ball to the clerk back of the counter, from where I had stolen the ball, and told her that I was sorry and would not do it again.

And the time my Mother caught me chewing tobacco. The low sweet voice of her, without demand or threat, asking me to quit chewing tobacco; and my trying to evade the promise by holding tobacco in my mouth without chewing it. The promise was still with me when I was in the army, in the field, with an aching tooth, and no means of relief except a possible narcotic effect of tobacco. Far-fetched? It is too unlikely to have been made up. I still do not use tobacco, although the intent of the promise has long run out.

I have learned, down through the years, that teenagers do not have reasons for all the things they do, be they in my group of sixty years ago, or my several grandchildren of the present generation. Another thing I have learned is that they will absorb the better things rather than the evil and unrewarding ways of life.