

A Homecoming to a Home I never had

by Gordon Laird

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The trip throughout the British Isles and Holland was gradually winding down, yet there will still be adventures awaiting us. It was September of 1950 and we were on the train to Hollyhead, destined for Ireland, my Father's Motherland. My Father left Ireland in 1913, responding to an advertisement from the Canadian Bank of Commerce. The personal cost of his emigration was never to see his Mother again, his Father having died two years before. He would never see Killukin, Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim again. His older brother George Laird was destined to take over the family farm, and the milk delivery route in Carrick. Now George and his wife, Molly lived in the family home on the farm "Killukin", with their only son, my Cousin Arthur.

I didn't keep a diary of my trip, unlike more careful observers, such as Norm Mullins, but in my old photo album I found postcards and as I released them from their sticky "corners" I realized I was good at writing home. My parents and my brother had saved all those cards. The reverse of those cards is my diary, my only diary!

The postcard picture is of "Houses of Parliament & Parliament Square, London. On the reverse is a message to friends of my parents:

London, September 14. Dear Folks: Sorry I couldn't write sooner but we've been very busy taking in all the sights. Everywhere the band has gone in England, Holland and Scotland, we have been treated royally. Next week we go over to Dublin. See you in a few weeks, Yours sincerely, Gordon Laird (could you save this card for me?)

The next day, September 15th I wrote to my Brother:

Dear Doug, Got your welcome letter today and was very interested in all the info. Next week at Dublin I hope to meet Uncle Fred or some of the family. See you in a couple of weeks. Love, Gordon. (Save this card, eh?)

Little did we know, on that train to Hollyhead, that we were about to embark on a sea voyage which we would be talking about 50 years later, as if it had just happened!

We left Hollyhead and ventured onto the Irish Sea on the Princess Maud, a small ship, at 2886 tons about one-half the gross tonnage of the Queen of Nanaimo. Fatefully I now realize it was 3:30 p.m. Saturday, September 16th.

There was a small lounge down some stairs where some of the boys joined the many others aboard ship, sitting and staring at each other. But as the boat began serious swaying, pitching and rolling, the warm room, with its sour food smell, mixed with fuel oil and other marine smells, became an unwelcome place. We ventured out on deck, and enjoyed the fresh salt-air for a while. But this was only the beginning! Now the deck was pitching so that at one moment we were seeing the bottom of a salty valley, and the next moment the sky. A brief glance down into that lounge showed that many were throwing up on the floor. Later this became a sticky dance-floor where people slipped and slid in vomit, then fell into that rancid mess.

Now I ventured up on the top deck, which was simply spectacular, for those who love roller coasters. It was dangerous to be there! It was dangerous to be anywhere on this ship. We were wet from rain and salt spray. I found a life boat which was covered in canvas, and chose that for my next habitation. But gradually even that rolling was too much and so I spent the rest of the trip lying on my back on a wooden bench on the top deck in the open. Miraculously, I didn't throw up. I didn't get "sick". I got really SICK! But that comes later.

When we finally landed in the Dublin harbour we were a bedraggled lot, water-soaked, sick and dispirited. It is hard to believe this hell took only four hours! We found out that we have survived a 60 mile per hour gale on the Irish Sea!

The Billboard at the Theatre Royal in Dublin read, "D.O.A. The Vancouver Boys Band". We certainly did feel like we were Dead On Arrival, although "D. O. A." was simply the name of the film that week. The headline in the Dublin newspaper blazed:

FIERCE GALE SWEEPS DUBLIN - BOATS CAPSIZE, TREES BLOCK ROADS. Further down in the article it read: "The mail boat arrived last night half-an-hour late with 600 passengers after a very rough crossing."

In my postcard to my parents I spared them any unpleasant details!

Dublin, September 24, (the picture on the reverse in "The Liffey From O'Connell Bridge, Dublin) To: Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Laird: Dear Folks, Day before yesterday I met Mr. Alford who invited me up to his house today. Last night his son and daughter-in-law took me out to supper and up to their place...

and on the same day (the picture is "In The Phoenix Park Dublin"): Dear Folks: We've had a very successful week here at the Theatre Royal - lovely theatre which holds 5,000. The second show was crowded every night. We played at 5:00 and 8:00 for an hour....

We were billeted in the YMCA, with a view of Phoenix Park in Dublin. It was now late September and bright but very cold. There was no recognition of the frigidity of the weather by the Irish, but we who remembered the luxuries of Vancouver sawdust-fired furnaces were darn cold! The only gesture toward heat in the YMCA were tiny fireplaces in the rooms, which were, of course, dead cold. And condemned.

We collected fallen branches from the trees in historic Phoenix Park and lit fires in those tiny fireplaces. I remember someone breaking up the wooden floor mat from a shower and throwing that on the fire. But it didn't keep us from shivering, and I was shivering more than most.

I have a vague memory of asking Mr. Delamont if I could visit my Father's Home Place: Killukin, in Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim. I think it was a secret deal, and I was to tell no one. I wonder now if there really was a sentimental side to Arthur Delamont? Did he remember at that moment that he had left his own city, Hereford, England, and emigrated to the new land, Canada? Whatever the reason, after a lecture about how this was very unorthodox request, he said "Yes".

I boarded a little old Irish train for the northwest, a 100 mile trip. I remember sitting on a bench in that old train car, with a pot-bellied stove.

My Uncle Fred, one of Dad's three elder brothers, picked me up with the help of his friend's tiny Anglia. Aunt Mona, Fred's wife, was in the car as well.

Of Dad's three brothers, George, the eldest son, still worked the farm. William and Fred had emigrated to Canada to homestead a farm in, I think, Alberta. William joined the Canadian Army and died of war wounds, April 18, 1917, somewhere in Europe. Fred had returned to his home town, Carrick-on-Shannon. Dad told me that in his youth Fred was the Carrick's champion weight-lifter. Dad's morale of this story is that Fred damaged his spine in weight-lifting and Dad always cautioned me against doing the same as Uncle Fred!

Fred and his wife Mona, drove me to Killukin, the farm where my Father was born. Dad had left in 1913, never expecting to return. Nobody from the Canadian family had visited, so here I was, 37 years later, the "Canadian Ambassador" to the Lairds at Killukin! Thanks to Arthur Delamont and the Kits Band.

I was warmly welcomed and indeed, treated like royalty, by my Uncle George and his wife Molly, and my Cousin Arthur. Aunt Molly put me in an upstairs room, on a comfortable bed, with (I will always remember) a "pig" at my feet. For those who don't know, a "pig" is a piece of pottery which is filled with a steaming kettle of hot water. Still shivering from the Irish Sea I was delighted to warm my toes on the "pig".

The next day I was shown around this working dairy farm. When I was shown the chicken coup it was with some shame, because this was the very hut in which my Father was born, replete with hard dirt floors.

Back in Dublin to rejoin the band before we embarked over the much quieter Irish Sea for Hollyhead and England, I took a moment to write this card:

Dublin, September 24 (the picture is St. George's Terrace, Carrick-on-Shannon) To: Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Laird: Dear Folks: Well I made it to Carrick and met all the folks. I'll have a lot to tell when I get home. They were very happy to see me and of course I enjoyed it very much myself. I've also met some relatives here in Dublin. Love, Gordon

I wrote not a word about having contracted a cold, which turned into pneumonia. We still had a 3 day trip to Paris and the return 10 day voyage to Quebec City, and the C. P. R. back to Vancouver.

When my parents met me as I stepped down from the train, they knew instantly I was really ill. My Doctor confirmed it. It was bed rest, school work, and nothing

else. My Mother had to talk a reluctant U. B. C. Registrar into allowing me to enter first year Commerce at U. B. C. And there was no way I could explain that I hadn't been ill at all during the trip, except after the four hour nightmare crossing of the Irish Sea!

P.s. Mom and Dad did travel back to Ireland after all. The "chicken coup": Cousin Arthur married Maeve and they had eight children. Their son Nigel has taken over Killukin and in the process has completely refurbished the "chicken coup" in which my Father was born. It is now called "Primrose Cottage" and is available over the Internet for rent for \$380 Euros per week.