

by Joan Killian Gallagher



Joan (standing) with her daughter Caroline and granddaughter Keira.

# The Heart of Ireland

In the heart of Ireland on the banks of the River Shannon, my great, great grandmother did something absolutely unheard of in her time.

In 1893, Anne Furey Killian took a stand and bought the family farm. She took advantage of newly enacted land legislation and broke free of controlling British landlords that had held them economic hostage for centuries.

As tenants, the family enjoyed few rights and women had even less. But she was utterly determined to become the







The Killian Homeplace (above). Joan's grandfather Thomas F. Gallagher, Sr. (below).

proprietor of her family land so that her children and their children would always have a place to call home. This formidable woman, Anne Killian, was 82 in 1893 and had been widowed for almost thirty years.

When I purchased the first half of The Killian Homeplace in 1998, I, too was a widow seeking a little stone cottage where I could bring my young daughter to enjoy Irish summers. Even our cousins in Ireland were unaware that Anne was the first Killian to actually wrest ownership of the family farm from the landlords. And the serendipity of destiny just kept recurring.

In 1991, as the grandchild of native-born Irish citizens, I exercised my right to apply for dual citizenship. I then looked on it as simply a business opportunity to connect with ever-expanding global markets. Never did I imagine that it would make it easier to buy the farm where my great grandfather was born. And if my daughter and I had not been on our way to Ireland for a short holiday at Easter in 2000, we would have missed the opportunity to acquire the second half of the original home place.

For me, there was always a magical aura about Ireland. I felt it as a little



girl when listening to my grandfather, Denis O'Shea, tell vivid stories about his childhood in Tipperary. He wrote poetry and could recite Shakespeare for what seemed like hours. He described the farmhouse, his brothers and sisters, their daily routines, their games and their schoolwork in such delightful detail that I felt I knew them. I could listen to those same stories over and over again. They never got old.

When I went to Ireland for the first time in 1977, his youngest sister, Alice, took me to the ruins of the O'Shea farmhouse in Glenbreda, outside of Borrisoleigh. As I gazed down from the top of that hill, the most incredible feeling swept over me. It was all so familiar, as though I had been there so many times before...it was home. When we walked down the fields to the derelict farmhouse, I knew exactly where to cross the stream in front of the cottage.

Once inside, it was heartbreaking to see the family home abandoned and unloved. The statue of the Blessed Virgin stood forlornly in the niche in the main room of the three-room house. Aunt Alice asked me to bring it home to America.

Of the seven O'Shea children, only my grandfather had children so the family descendants were all in America. It was so meaningful to her that this heirloom be kept in the O'Shea family. I brought it back to New York and treasure it as a poignant piece of my grandfather's legacy.

The next year, I founded Warden Brooks, Ltd. On April 15, 1978, the day after the incorporation papers were filed, the *Washington Post* reported, "the





*Notre Dame students at the Killian Homeplace.*

market closed at 795.13, its best level for the day and the highest close since January 5.”

Warden Brooks was off and running, first to market with high quality custom-designed corporate gifts.

Prior to launching Warden Brooks, I had spent four years working for G.S Harvale, a division of The Palm Beach Company, designing corporate ties and scarves. I handled both the production and the sales. I thrived on the challenges and felt grateful to have a job that I loved and that carried real responsibility.

When I graduated from college in 1971, after an initial job search, I soon realized that I had to take a six-week typing course just to get hired anywhere in New York. It was a shocking reality check.

The job at Harvale gave me the opportunity to be hands on at every level. Our sales doubled every year and I became increasingly confident that there was a market for other products. Certainly corporate America wouldn't buy ties and scarves every year.

When I proposed branching out into new product lines, I was summarily shot down. Sensing my frustration, my father suggested that I strike out on my own, an amazing show of belief in my ability.

I was a young woman, 28, newly married with our first mortgage. How could I possibly succeed? He said he would lend me the money to get going and that he was confident that it would work. I can still hear him telling me in his reassuring way: “What's the worst thing

that could happen? You'd just have to get another job.”

Warden Brooks' sales skyrocketed right out of the gate. I rode that tiger for dear life, working seven days a week, often 16 hours a day. There were no computers, no cell phones, and no course to prepare me for the phenomenal speed at which the company accelerated.

It was incredible as a young businesswoman to be part of such an explosive chapter in the history of corporate America. The management of Warden Brooks took all my energy and focus in the 70's and 80's. And then in 1990, my daughter Caroline was born and a new, exciting chapter in my life began.

I reconnected with my Irish roots in October 1996, when I brought my father to Dublin for the Notre Dame (ND)/Navy football game in Croke Park in Dublin. At 84, he was a proud ND graduate and still a passionate Fighting Irish fan.

Our Notre Dame story had begun almost a century before and it has always held a prominent place in our hearts and in our family's history. It was on this trip that we took a rainy Thursday afternoon to drive out to the country to see my mother's first cousin, Sally Killian Gately.

Sally lived in the cottage where my grandmother was born in County Roscommon, with her daughter, Mary Doyle, son-in-law and three grandchildren. It was such a warm, happy house, bustling with activity. There were cousins with their children, neighbors and friends that I had never met. In an amazing twist of fate,

it just happened to be her 90th birthday and they were all gathered to celebrate.

My love for Ireland was rekindled immediately after having spent almost twenty years away. I could see my daughter running in the fields and being carefree with her Irish cousins who were the same age. I imagined walks to the Shannon, music in the pubs and doing genealogy...just relaxing and being free to do whatever we wanted to do.

Relaxation was a foreign concept to me after exhausting years of running a growing business, and then raising a child on my own. I knew at that moment that Ireland was going to be increasingly important in my life as I scanned the happy Irish faces of my cousins gathered around the table.

What I could never have imagined is that my romantic dream of a tiny stone cottage would morph into a compound of three farms, each with its own cottage.

Two of the cottages are part of the original Killian Homeplace, where my great grandfather, Laurence Killian, was born in 1833. The third is Rita's Cottage, where my dear friend Rita Shea Connolly was born. Rita played a crucial part in our Irish story as it was she who was responsible for making me see the light before it was too late for I had initially passed on the offer to buy the actual Killian Homeplace.

I already had one cottage that I had not been able to restore and I certainly didn't want the burden of taking on a second one. Rita could see what I was unable to

see...that I would lose the opportunity forever to put the two farms back together as one and restore The Killian Homeplace.

Just after I bought the second farm, Rita had a stroke and died soon thereafter. I was heartbroken. I couldn't imagine going back to Ireland ever again with Rita gone. And yet six years later, I also purchased her cottage and adjoining farm. It felt so right to do that.

Just six months later, destiny again intervened on a blind date. I fell head over heels in love with a wonderful man, Christopher Clark, who had also been widowed. It was so unexpected for both of us. We married ten months later and never looked back. Both his grandmothers

mines. He could neither read, nor write. In 1919, he promised his dying wife that their three sons would never go down into the mines. And true to his word, the three Gallagher men graduated from Notre Dame: Peter in 1928, James in 1932 and my father, Thomas in 1935.

Tom Gibbons, my contact at Notre Dame for the scholarship, came to the 2012 game and was one of the first overnight guests at the Killian Homeplace. He set the wheels in motion to connect us with Kevin Whelan, Director of the Notre Dame Dublin Global Gateway. Kevin came out to Fermoy with his team early the next year. Sitting in the Homeplace, they, too, felt the serenity and grasped the potential.

were so much richer for having tapped into the magic that is Ireland.

We wanted to create a genuine living place, a sanctuary, where educational and cultural exchange could occur in a very ordinary way. It would happen just walking to the Shannon or chatting with a neighbor. It would offer an authentic experience that would never be in a tourist brochure.

Visitors could sit in the Homeplace and feel the spirit of the Killians, but understand it on a more universal level. Whether their heritage is Irish, Italian, Spanish, Eastern European or African, the story is very much the same. Their ancestors left their respective birthplace in search of a better life. And they left behind hardworking family that they loved deeply. Coming back was a way of closing that broken circle of connection.

And now in another lovely twist of fate, both sides of our family's history have been brought together and become important parts of the Killian Homeplace.

I felt it very keenly in June this year. As I waited for the Notre Dame students to arrive, I took a minute to sit down and catch my breath. The Homeplace cottages were all ready for their arrival. The weather was clear and bright and Caroline, Brian and Baby Keira were with us for the first time. I glanced up at the portrait of Thomas F. Gallagher Sr., the grandfather that I had never met. It actually brought tears to my eyes to imagine him looking down on his descendants gathered in this little cottage in the very heart of rural Ireland.

I felt such an overwhelming sense of gratitude that we were about to share our heritage with these Notre Dame students. I felt as if he was right there in the room thanking me for keeping his memory alive. ☺



*The Warden Brooks Wall Street Banker Bag.*

were 100% Irish and Christopher believed in the restoration project just as much as I did. And so back to Ireland we went. It took another seven years to finish the reconstruction project and to be in a position to step back and look at the big picture.

"Build it and they will come" popped into our minds, but we never really knew who the "they" were.

In 2012, as the last stones were being set at the Killian Homeplace, the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame were once again back in Dublin to play Navy. In 2007, I endowed a scholarship at Notre Dame in memory of my coalminer grandfather, Thomas F. Gallagher, Sr., one of eight sons of immigrants from Ardara in County Donegal. When his father died, he was forced to leave school to work in the

The following June, we hosted 20 Notre Dame students and professors in the three cottages of the Killian Homeplace. The students were in Ireland to work as interns in their various fields of study for corporations, charities, branches of the government or in scientific research.

The inaugural weekend in 2013 was an incredible success, as the ND students just loved the whole adventure. This year, we hosted our seventh Notre Dame Intern weekend. My daughter Caroline, our Irish son-in-law, Brian Lynn and our beautiful granddaughter, Keira Killian Lynn, born in February 2019, joined us for the first time.

Being able to share our little corner of Ireland is the realization of a life long dream. During our time in Ireland, our horizons were broadened on every level. Our hearts were warmed in unexpected ways. Our lives



JOAN KILLIAN GALLAGHER is the founder of Warden Brooks, Ltd., and a past recipient of the Enterprising Women of the Year Award. She is a longtime member of the Enterprising Women

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