

Trunks & Old Photos

By Lauren Rever

The moment I saw the hundred-year-old trinkets and worn objects during a field trip to the 19th century immigration center, I felt connected to the immigrants. These weren't just a pair of shoes or a hat. This was a boy's hat, one he wore to keep his hair out of his face or to keep him warm in the cold New England winters. The owner of the shoes probably loved them enough to include them on the journey to America. Perhaps she pictured wearing them as she walked on American soil for the first time. Maybe they both went on to work in the Lowell Mills. Maybe they were to become someone's great-grandparents.

My father's mother came from Ireland in the 1950s. Her own grandparents remained in their homeland during some of the toughest years in their country. My father's father fought in World War II and was stationed in Ireland where he met my grandmother. Their story was anything but romantic, and left my family with the scars of an orphaned and abandoned child. Eventually the man, Lawrence Sporburt, returned to my grandma, and had four more legitimate children, all with good Irish names. As time went on, necessity drove them to America. My grandma left behind her children and family to try to make a prosperous life.

My mother's grandparents were forbidden to marry; a proper Italian woman would never marry a lowly Irish man. They were first generation, and the 'old world' was extremely prominent in their households. Though it went against tradition, my mother's grandparents married, lived in Boston, and raised a hardworking Catholic boy, James. He would carry on the MacDonald name and marry Kathy Gagghiardi.

I walked into the mills with the rest of the class and studied the machines. They seemed ancient to my technology-worn eyes. Next to one model textile machine sat a woven basket of yarn, as if it had never moved after being set down a hundred years ago. I pictured the women and children working in these factories; I made up their stories in my head. Were they working to support their families? Were they young brides earning a living? Did they have hardworking parents? Did their grandparents leave the old world and come with them to America, or were they left behind? I looked at the vast expanse of the room, and yearned to know more.

Lawrence did not work as hard as he could. After my father was born, alcoholism and lack of responsibility led Lawrence astray. My grandma made the decision to get a divorce. She remarried within a few years to George Rever, and my dad took his name. Granddad and Grandma Rever lived a prosperous life with two children and two dogs, but with the shadow of a broken family hanging over them.

As good Catholics, Grandma and Grandpa Mac had eight children, my mother the eldest. Grandpa made the long dining room table from a hospital door. The family spent their summers in Martha's Vineyard. Grandpa Mac worked at the Boston fish markets when my mom was little and brought home what he could. At night he studied engineering. Within a few years he became a top engineer in the area and left the fish market behind. From oldest to youngest, my aunts and uncles were sixteen years apart, yet they were all extremely close. My Great-Grandma Gagliardi would feed them ginger ale and ice cream for breakfast and spoil them silly. I grew up with the large, loud, MacDonald clan, and have never tired of them.

There were five old fashioned leather trunks in the room. We were informed that these trunks were lost or confiscated at immigration checkpoints, and the museum had since gathered

as much information as possible about the people who had left them behind. I looked at a small plain trunk with no distinguishable features. It had belonged to a young Portuguese girl named Maria who had come to America in the 1880's. Inside was a pair of worn shoes, some fabrics, and a doll. I picked up the objects and studied each of them. I wanted to see a photo of Maria; what was her story?

My dad recently received photographs of his family from his mother's sister, Rosemary. I'm told I look like her. He tries to keep in touch with as many family members as he can – those who speak to him, that is. The pictures show happy images of my Grandma Rever and her sisters, my father as a baby, even one of me taken by Rosemary when I was a baby. I found a pair of old fashioned reading glasses in the basement that belonged to Lawrence. I couldn't quite describe how I felt about seeing the objects and images of my family history. I went upstairs and quietly asked my dad to tell me about his family.

The last picture taken of Grandpa Mac is of him holding me during my first Christmas. My mom keeps it on her dresser next to a black and white picture of her parents and some other family photos. I remember going to a memorial mass for my grandparents when I was eight or nine. I was too young to really be interested in the service, but my curiosity about who they were overwhelmed me. I always hear, "Your dad was a great guy" or "Grandma would have loved that," but I can't put faces to a name. Every once in a while I ask my aunt or older cousins to tell me what our grandparents were like. Each time, more pieces are added to the puzzle that is Grandma and Grandpa Mac .

I couldn't help but think of the people I learned about at the immigration center during the entire bus ride home, and throughout the rest of the day. The immigrants looking for a new

life, the workers trying to earn a living, the families trying to stay together through the chaos of it all – it felt so real to me, even though I never knew these people, and never will.

My biological grandparents all passed away before I was old enough to remember them. I learn about them through old pictures and stories told by my relatives. Granddad Rever remarried in his 60s and added Grannie Annie to our family. I never grew close with the two of them and I sometimes joke with my dad about how I can't picture my granddad working with kids, let alone raising two. I regret not having a closer bond, yet we both seem too preoccupied to get to know each other. Having distant grandparents makes me even more curious about my ancestry. I now am working on a scrapbook of different parts of my family's history as a preservation of memory and story. As I work on it, I sit and examine each photo carefully; the black and white photos overlap with the dully colored photos of a later time. Each photo, each piece of someone's history, holds its own story.