



# Reflections of a River Rat

Did I ever tell you the story of your great-grandfather?

**By Jim Holleran**

We walk through cemeteries to search for a loved one, and when we find the grave it's like spotting the tip of an iceberg. Your mind leaps to a memory or an old photo, but the image never moves beyond there. Names and dates are etched into the stones, but they read like a list. They don't tell stories. We need oral traditions and family historians for that. We need some with a pen or a keyboard to record it all.

I recently went for a walk through Saint John's Catholic Cemetery in Newport, N.Y., with two of my octogenarian aunts. A cousin soon wandered past with one of my uncles. Still more cousins milled about. A moment of family tradition and history was about to unfold.

We were gathered under the autumn sun because two of my cousins, Pat and Rosemary, held a service to place the remains of their husbands, Joseph Kowalewski and James FitzSimons, into a shared stone. Their stone lists their names with dates of birth and death. It doesn't reflect Jim's unwavering kindness or Joe's quiet work ethic.

This gathering stemmed from my mother's side of the family – the Maxwells. Attendance is never an issue at a funeral, wedding or reunion with this clan. Eileen Regina Maxwell Holleran was one of 12 children who produced 48 grandchildren. Now those grandchildren have become grandparents. The cycle of life continues, but oral histories and stories are lost with each generation.

This cemetery walk was an opportunity to preserve those memories. So I took Aunt Rosemary, sharp as a tack at age 92, for a stroll to find her parents' grave. Aunt Lois, age 86, joined us.



"I know the stone has a reddish cast to it," Rosemary recalled. We stepped gingerly among the plots and granite markers until we spotted it. There were the names – Bernard and Nora. A statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary signaled that their daughter Norma – a girl my mother had never known – was buried there too.

The stones don't reflect this, but Norma died as a 6-year-old. The family sat down for dinner in the summer of 1928 and a tin of salmon was opened. The parents and their six oldest children became ill from the tainted food except for a seventh child, a 9-month-old baby. My mother Eileen emerged unscathed, and grew up to raise six children, leading to 12 grandchildren and 3 great-grandchildren. It was the luck of the fates.

The stone also doesn't capture the plight of my grandfather, Bernard James. He was repairing asphalt on the Newport-Middleville road in December 1960 when a careless driver came down a twisting turn and crushed him into a tar wagon. He died overnight from his injuries.



We shuffled onto the graves of my great-grandparents, Adolph and Anna Stock. He had arrived from Germany as an 18-year-old in 1885. He and four siblings from a family of 14 made their way from Roth, Bavaria, to the North Sea port of Hamburg. Within months, he was working on a farm around Newport. Distance and technology left him estranged from his parents, Andrew and Caroline, and nine siblings in Germany. They had only letters.

Anna McNierny arrived in 1888 at age 14 from the hamlet of Cooraclare, just north of the Shannon River in County Clare, Ireland. She came over with two sisters – one settled in New York, the other returned to Cooraclare. Anna and Adolph married when she turned 18, and within three years, Nora Caroline Stock was born.

“The strange thing is that when World War I broke out, there may have been cousins fighting cousins,” said my cousin and family historian, Joe Maxwell. “Think about it. Five children on this side of the Atlantic and nine in Germany.”

Imagine having the name Adolph when World War II broke out in 1939. My grandfather, a railroad laborer, never had to confront that. He was killed in 1934 when a milk truck struck his railway cart at a highway crossing near Herkimer, N.Y. He was hospitalized for a month before passing from his injuries.



The circumstances make you appreciate my grandmother’s deep Catholic faith. She lost a child to ptomaine poisoning, a father to a railroad accident, then was widowed at age 55. She lived to age 90 and remained devoted to her rosary and afternoon meditations. She was not a “woe is me” woman.

My parents were buried in Sunnyside Cemetery in Morristown. Francis Holleran’s marker simply states “1921-1982.” There is no mention of coaching football, basketball or baseball titles in the defunct Valley League or touching students’ lives or pulling me out of the St. Lawrence River by the hair. It’s the same for Eileen Holleran. 1927-1998. No mention of her antique collection, her cool under pressure, or caring for a few thousand infants during a 47-year career at A. Barton Hepburn Hospital.

In this age of technology, we need old-fashioned family historians and oral traditions.

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