



After three hours of apple cutting, piemaking and story telling, my cousins Pat Murphy Kowalewski and Rosemary Murphy FitzSimons lounge in a VIP suite at the Rochester International Jazz Festival.



Reflections of a River Rat: Improvising a family reunion over pies and all that jazz

I hosted two of my favorite cousins last weekend for the Maxwell family reunion. Never mind that only three of us attended. I didn't ignore the other 43 first cousins on my mother's side. I simply couldn't invite them. The family is just too big.

When the reunion occurs July 23 in Fairfield, New York, I'll be babysitting my grandson in Reading, Pa. Meanwhile, my cousin Rosemary Murphy FitzSimons will be driving her motor home through Washington, Oregon and Montana on her annual Western States swing with her granddaughter. So we are commissioning Ro's sister, Pat Murphy Kowalewski, to represent us at this reunion of the Mohawk Valley Irish Mafia.



Our assembly line churned out eight large and two small apple pies. One went to the Murphy girls 96-year-old mother, Helen, another to her 93-year-old sister Rosemary, and six more to the Maxwell family reunion.

Pat will be carrying six apple pies in lieu of Rosemary and me skipping out. Ro usually provides an elaborately decorated cake. Occasionally, I've presented a spoofed Irish song such as "Who Let the Barnflies into Mrs. Murphy's Kitchen." But neither is happening this year.

Our family reunions suffer from the same factors and complaints that most families lament:

- "The people that live the closest never come."
- "I already committed to something else."
- "Sometimes I think we have more outlaws than in-laws."
- "Too many people are unvaccinated."
- "I'm going to avoid Uncle Joe and his silly talk about (choose one – MAGA, the Jan. 6 hearings, gun control, abortion, all of the above)."

My family encompasses all of those complaints. They reflect the sheer size of the clan. My mother, Eileen, was one of 12 Maxwells. One sister died at age 6 and two others became Catholic nuns so they didn't have children. That left nine others to produce 49 cousins. Among the ranks you'll find every social malady and misgiving combined with several foibles and feuds. You also will find some of the kindest, most charitable people I know. Our diversity is rooted in the fact that we can't agree on anything.

The Hollerans suffered the same fate. We had 21 cousins on that side (that's 64 altogether if you are doing the math). When Fran Holleran and three of his four siblings aged and passed, the family splintered. Without your parents, the motivation to attend an annual picnic wanes. Only Charley, 90, is left, but his



The PIE Network delivers apple pies to people dealing with a loss or celebrating a family achievement.

wife, four children, 10 grandchildren and 9 great-grandchildren still would fill several picnic tables.

Same deal for the Morristown Hollerans. My siblings traditionally gather each July 4 in Morristown to jump in the chilly waters of the St. Lawrence, watch the fireworks, attend the parade, share a meal and embellish the same stories. But my sister Mary Nora will be hosting company, Fran is conserving

his time in South Florida to visit grandchildren in north Florida and Queens, my son Liam is working in Los Angeles, and my late brother Matt never came anyway.

That's the trouble with big families. Do we focus on who attends, or lament who skips out? Is the glass half empty or half full?

Well, we still can celebrate Maureen's children coming from Boston, Virginia and Tokyo, and Anne Marie's daughters coming from Plattsburgh and NYC, and my threesome driving from Reading.

The glass was half full last weekend. Cousin Ro suggested a road trip to Pat. Ro surmised if we were going to be AWOL, we could tap into the PIE Network – my initiative to distribute pies to deserving members of the community – to cover our absence at the family shindig.

We didn't need a picnic pavilion and pig roast to have a good time, but we did catch up on family news, air our grievances about unvaccinated relatives, and retell the same old stories.

What we lacked was the senior element of my mom's family. Her two surviving brothers don't attend, but this gathering is a summertime staple for her three surviving sisters – Helen, 96; Rosemary, 92; and Lois, 88. They revel in the stories and memories of the living and deceased. They thrive on the retelling of Lois

romancing a ship's engineer, who my mother dubbed Mr. Goodwrench. Rosemary will recall how she caught Eileen kicking her dog. Perhaps someone will break out the calendar on which we superimposed Helen's head over Marilyn Monroe's body in the iconic steam grate photo.

We revisited all these last weekend while apple peelings hit the floor and Irish music played in the background. We cut two pecks of apples, baked 10 pies, cleaned up, then headed out to dinner and the first night of the Rochester International Jazz Festival.

That downtown street festival had its smalltown feel too. Mary and I ran into basketball parents, a referee buddy, my wife's work acquaintance, former colleagues from the newspaper, our children's faith formation director, a couple whose family owns a wonderful Irish bar, and a friend who grew up in Morristown, Maureen Moore Mazer. Small world.

It will be the same deal in Morristown next week. Pals will find pals, old friendships will be revisited, and plenty of stories will be told over a beverage or three.

I won't worry about whom I don't see. I am more worried about the river temperature. I just checked and it was only 63.

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