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A Banjo Story

BY DAN HUBBS

I started playing the banjo because of Freddie Laker. I was working as a landscaper when I heard about his $100 dollar flights from New York to London. This was in 1978. I was 19 years old. My mother's good friend's parents lived in Reading, England. I could stay with them, if I wanted. My father told me his mother—my grandmother—would be in Ireland. I wasn't sure about Ireland, but I thought, I'll go to England. So, off I went. No food on the flight, I carried a paper bag with a peanut butter sandwich. I figured out how to take the train to Reading.

You'll see that certain, seemingly unrelated events had to happen, had to fall into place to inspire my banjo playing.

I was welcomed and well fed in Reading. I had a good time. I attended the "Picnic" at Blackbushe music festival in Hampshire, where Dylan and Clapton and others played. (There was a punk band playing outside the gate, protesting corporate music.) I hitchhiked down to London. I got picked up by a truck driver, and we had this conversation:

"Where you headed, Lad?"

"To London."

"Whereabouts in London? It's a big place."

"I'm not sure. Is there like a central downtown area?"

"Here's what you can do. I'll drop you at the tube and take it to Victoria Station."

"Ok. That sounds good."

"Yeah, that's pretty central, like."

No such thing as cell phones, of course, at this time. I had a folding map that I unfolded against a railing at the top of the stairs out of Victoria Station. I'm not sure what I was looking for. The green parks, the streets, and neighborhoods were complete mysteries. It wasn't long before a guy responded to my

My grandmother, Nora O'Connor, and my father on boat from Ireland in 1930s. *All photos courtesy of the author.*

baffled look and offered suggestions. Turned out he was American, a graduate student in English, from Stony Brook University.

"You know that Dylan song where it goes, 'I'm going back to New York City, I do believe I've had enough?' Well, I've been traveling for a while, and I'm heading back."

He directed me to a hostel, and we talked about where he'd been, where I should go.

"Well, I might go to Ireland," I told my new friend.

"No, you have to go to Ireland," he said. "Haven't you read James Joyce?"

"My grandmother's going to be visiting. She grew up there."

"Are you kidding me? You have to go to Ireland. Really. You never know when you'll get a chance again. And you have relatives. Man, you'll love Ireland."

So, based on this conversation, I decided I had to go to Ireland. After a few days in London, I took the train and the boat over to Cork.

Walking off the boat, carrying my pack, heading into town, an older gentleman fell in beside me.

"Good day to you, son," he said, "Where are you off to?"

"I'm visiting," I told him. "My grandmother is from County Kerry."

"Is she?"

"Yeah. I'm going to Abbeyfeale."

"Why, you're not visiting at all." he said. "You're home!"

"Oh," I said. "Thanks."

I spent the night in Cork at a bed and breakfast, which was a room with a bed in a family home. I sat watching TV with Mom and the kids, sipping on a glass of stout. In the morning, I was out hitching again. Got picked up by a woman who had owned an Irish bar in Brooklyn and had retired back to Ireland. Being 19, and a bit scatterbrained, more interested in reading and music and art than in the world in front of me, I lost the scrap of paper with the phone number of the family in Abbeyfeale. In a little town along the way, I found myself in a phone booth, running my finger down the list of O'Connors. There were many O'Connors in that book, many, many O'Connors to choose from. I started dialing.

Cousin Eileen O'Connor, Ray Hubbs, and Uncle Patrick O'Connor singing in the kitchen.

Somehow, eventually, I got through to the right house. Funny thing, my American Uncle Jimmy picked up the phone.

"Who is this?" he said.

"Dan Hubbs, from America."

"Dan Hubbs? Really?"

"I'm Nora's Grandson."

"No kidding?" he said. "Hey, my nephew is on the phone," he said, to whoever was there.

"Jimmy Fawcett's nephew is on the phone!" someone yelled. "He's here in Ireland."

"That's not Jimmy Fawcett's nephew," my grandmother put in. "That's my grandson!"

I spent some time sitting on the curb in downtown Abbeyfeale, and Uncle Jimmy came and collected me and took me to the family farm. This is the house my grandmother, one of 13 kids, grew up in. My Uncle Tadhg was still running the dairy farm, still milking the cows, putting up the hay. The house was on a road across from the River Feale outside of the town of Abbeyfeale. Aunt Julia came running down the walk to kiss me, and I was welcomed with handshakes and pats on the back and poteen and dinner. And that first night, there was music.

I grew up on suburban Long Island, and the music I heard and listened to came courtesy of the music industry; it came over the radio and was found at the record store. I was a crazed fan. My friends were crazed fans. We saved our caddying money and dishwashing money to buy singles and albums, which we sat around listening to. We read the covers and admired the artwork. We shared and swapped what we couldn't afford. Albums were lost and albums were gained in this bartering system, and knowledge of songs and bands and musicians was of utmost importance. There was teenage pride in knowing and caring about music, about the right music. By this time, I had built a sizable collection of the

Beatles, Rolling Stones, Doors, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and so on. I even took guitar lessons for a while and was surprised and confused that what I was playing from *Mel Bay's Modern Guitar Method, Grade 1* didn't sound anything like what I heard on records. I spent some time playing the melody notes of *The Song of the Volga Boatman*. The melody of the *Volga Boatman* was not what I had in mind. In any case, this is the background I brought with me to Abbeyfeale, Ireland.

I will add that, sometimes at family gatherings, my Uncle John would break into song. He would belt out *Don't Tread on the Tail of Me Coat*, and *Finnegan's Wake*, and a few others. My father owned a few Clancy Brothers albums. I heard the Clancy Brothers *Sing of the Sea* and *Isn't It Grand Boys* every so often from the family record player. My Uncle John played bagpipes, too, and marched with the Ancient Order of Hibernians at Saint Patrick's Day parades in New York City and elsewhere.

It was my first night, staying at the farmhouse, and after a few pints of stout and a sip or two of local *poitin* (poteen), there was singing. It began, as it always seems to begin, like this:

"Uncle Paddy, give us a song."

"Oh well, I couldn't."

Oh, go on, give us a song."

"My throat's a bit dry just now."

"Get Paddy a small whiskey. Or is it *poitin*, you'd be needing?"

"I'll take just a small whiskey, for lubrication, so."

"Ah, of course you would."

"Dan, do you need another stout?"

"Sure."

"Good man, yourself, then."

So, when the time was right, when the energy was right, and the hesitation was overcome, Uncle Paddy stood up, cleared his throat and sang. He sang:

I went down to Galway Town
To seek for recreation
On the seventeenth of August
My mind being elevated
There were passengers assembled
With their tickets at the station
My eyes began to dazzle
And they off to see the races
With me whack
Fol the doe
Fol the diddlie
Idle aye

Everyone listened intently to the words and the lovely trills and his earnest expressive demeanor. There was encouragement mid-song: "Good man, yourself." "Good man, Paddy." There was a circle of aunts and uncles and American visitors in attendance. A few others had songs that night. Aunt Peg, from Pittsfield, Massachusetts, offered *The Wild Colonial Boy*. But Paddy was the real singer, with a seemingly endless store of songs, most of which I had never heard. All the same, I was delighted and moved. We drank and listened and talked. I heard about cousins in Germany and uncles in the Bronx, and I tried to piece it all together and remember who was who. As my grandmother was one of thirteen, there were many people to discuss and to hear about.

Having turned up, unexpectedly, out of nowhere, so to speak, I got my share of attention and love. My cousin Eileen, in particular, befriended me and helped me understand who was who. I heard the sad story of Tadhg's and Julia's son, who had drowned in the river across the street. His sister, who was present at the tragedy, was living in London.

I was told there would be a proper "sing song" at the local pub, before all the Yanks headed back to the States.

Over the next few days, I was ferried around Tralee and Dingle in fine fashion. Uncle Paddy drove some of us down to Brandon. Uncle Jack O'Brien had an elderly aunt who lived in a small cabin above the sea. They had never met, but she teared up on learning that Jack was her sister's son and that he had come back from America and had dropped in to say hello. She didn't know much English, but invited us into her humble home and offered us tea. The cabin had a swept dirt floor, a few chairs by an open turf fire, and a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the wall. From up there, you could see the black fishing boats—*currachs*—out in Brandon Bay. Jack and Peg invited me to join them on a bus trip around the Ring of Kerry. A few of us drove up Brandon Mountain and walked Conor Pass. In Dingle we found the Holy Stone and drank a few glasses of stout while a fiddle player offered jigs and reels.

We visiting Americans helped Uncle Tadhg build haystacks. Our efforts notwithstanding, our stacks left much to be desired. "Yankee stacks!" Uncle Tadhg said, laughing. He got them straightened out.

The last night arrived, and I found myself at a local pub with my new friends and family members. My grandparents and American aunts and uncles were flying out the next day, and I had decided to take the boat from Cork to Le Havre and to see Paris on the cheap.

The pub closed at 10 p.m., as per Irish law. The publican looked outside, to make sure no police were about, he said, and then locked

Uncle John Hubbs, Pam Hubbs, and Michelle Hubbs, singing in the kitchen.

Aunt Julia and Uncle Tadgh O'Connor in Abbeyfeale.

the door. He ushered the crowd into a back room where chairs were arranged in a circle.

Here were cousins, aunts and uncles, neighbors, Sister Bega (one of my grandmother's sisters), a priest, etc. A man played a jig on a concertina, stomping his foot to keep time, and listeners spoke to him, offering encouragement to help him along. When he finished, the woman sitting next to him sang a sweet sad song. It may have been *The Bard of Armagh*. Next came a young woman who recited a poem. The stage, as it were, was moving, person to person, coming closer. To brace myself, I drank deep from my glass of Guinness. Next in line was the priest who had an acoustic guitar. He played a fingerpicking pattern and sang a song. Most everyone joined in on the chorus. It may have been *A Nation Once Again*, if memory serves.

Soon enough it was my turn, and all eyes were on me. I did what most Yanks would do in this situation and begged off.

"You said you knew some guitar chords," Eileen protested.

"I'm not good," I said.

"Dan," Eileen said, "It doesn't matter how good you are. Play a song, play anything. Join in."

"Yea, but ...

"Share something. Be part of it, like."

She grabbed the priest's guitar and put it in my hands. I looked around, I took another gulp of stout.

"I kind of know a Bob Dylan song," I mumbled.

"Lovely," Eileen said.

After a few seconds of blank panic, the chords came back to me. The G, the A minor and the C, all the way through. The same chords in the verse and the chorus. And I sang, "Clouds so swift, the rain won't lift, the gate won't close, the railings froze . . ." I had the distinct feeling that this particular song (*You Ain't Goin' Nowhere*) was not the best choice for this audience. But I pushed it along and sang as much as I remembered. When I was through, I got pretty much the same reaction that everyone else got:

"Good man, Dan."

"Very good, indeed."

And so on.

Then it was the next person's turn, and my fumbling performance receded into the past. It was part of the whole, nothing more. It wasn't wonderful, it wasn't the end of the world. It wouldn't make me famous, or wealthy, or cause women to love me. It wasn't about being extraordinary. It was about being part of the night's activities of sharing and expressing things that might not otherwise be expressed. It was part of a not untypical night in rural County Kerry in 1976. However, it was a special night for one American who had been encouraged and included and made to feel part of the community.

The night went along and drew to a close, as these things do. Next morning was the time for goodbyes. I was driven to Cork with my backpack and caught the boat to France, and so on and so forth.

It was a few years later, during a difficult time for me, when I was pretty much lost, that I bought a banjo. I was unsure about a lot of things on the day I walked into Lark Street Music in Albany, New York, and saw a banjo that was hanging on the wall. I didn't know what to do about a career or a job, and I didn't know what to do about finding a partner and maintaining a relationship, but I felt there was something promising in that instrument. I had a pocket full of crumpled dollar bills from working as a bartender. I spread the bills out on the counter and walked out with the banjo and an instruction book—and a feeling that things were going to be okay.

Over the years, I've had the good fortune to play with fiddle players and string bands. I've played in libraries and schools and bars and senior centers. I've played at a wedding and at a funeral, and for friends and for family gatherings. I play a few Irish songs and tunes, but mostly I play in the American folk tradition, derived from African and European songs and techniques. (I learned that my maternal grandfather's brother played banjo. That side of the family were people of color from Barbados.) I've been inspired by string bands and banjo players who recorded in the 1920s, by the *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Folkways, 1952), by country blues, musicians, semiprofessional and amateur, including Wade Ward, Blind Lemon Jefferson, the Clancy Brothers, the Carter Family, etc. Yet, I know, that I never would have gotten past the notion that music was made by talented celebrities, without the experience of those nights in Abbeyfeale, Ireland, back in 1978.

When my grandmother, Nora O'Connor, passed away in 2001, she left me a little money. She left me, in fact, enough to buy the banjo I still play. It's a Bart Reiter Special, a good sounding, well-made banjo. I've learned, and I'm still learning, how to play it. When I pick it up, I think of my grandmother and of the family farmhouse still standing in County Kerry, and my first visit back "home." That visit changed my life.

Dan Hubbs is a librarian, an old-time style banjo player, and a songwriter. His book of poems, *Downtown Super Tells All*, based on his years working as a building superintendent in Manhattan, was published in 2020. He has performed at Caffè Lena, Skidmore College (Solomon Northup Day celebration), Great Camp Sagamore, and schools and libraries in Saratoga Springs and the Adirondacks. Photo courtesy of the author.

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