

# The Shanachie



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## A tale of two Thanksgivings

December 2020 marks the 400th anniversary of the founding of the colony of Plymouth in Massachusetts by English Pilgrim immigrants. Plymouth was not the first European colony in North America, nor the first English colony in the United States or New England. But Plymouth has always held a special place of eminence in early American history.

One reason for that is the inspiring story of how the Pilgrims persevered. One hundred and two of them sailed on the Mayflower from Plymouth, England, on Sept. 16, 1620. After 55 days at sea, they reached the eastern tip of Cape Cod. There 41 of them signed the Mayflower Compact agreeing to establish in their colony a democratic form of government where leaders would all be elected and laws would be passed for the benefit of everyone.

While the Mayflower remained anchored at what today is Provincetown, Capt. Miles Standish and a few of the men explored the northern shore of Cape Cod in a shallop. Reaching the mainland on Dec. 21, they came upon a harbor about 40 miles south of present-day Boston. They navigated the



*Just 400 years ago, Pilgrims and Native Americans gathered together at Plymouth in Massachusetts to break bread in thanks for a bountiful harvest of corn.*

shallop toward an eye-catching landmark, a boulder at water's edge, and there, according to tradition, they stepped out onto the boulder which they named Plymouth Rock.

David H. Montgomery, an historian who wrote textbooks for schools, told the story simply and beautifully: "... A few days later, the Mayflower sailed into that harbor, the men all went ashore and the work of building a log hut for general use began. Later, another cabin was erected, but it had to be used for a hospital instead of a settler's

home. Such were the hardships during that winter that by spring just half of the colony were in their graves. But when the Mayflower went back (to England) in April 1621, not one of the Pilgrims returned on her. They had come to stay."

In the midst of their hardships, the Pilgrims were befriended by Native Americans. A Patuxet Indian named Squanto, who had been kidnapped by an English explorer and had been in Europe for a time, came to live in Plymouth for 20 months, serving as a guide and translator. He, in turn, introduced the Pilgrims to Massasoit, chief of the Wampanoags, who occupied southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

"The Indians belonging to Massasoit's tribe were very kind to the Pilgrims," according to Montgomery: "They showed them how to plant corn and how to shoot fish with bows and arrows. They also taught the white men how to dig clams on the beach, and how to catch eels by treading them out of the mud. If the Indians had not helped the colonists in these ways they might all have starved ...

"When autumn came, the corn was gath-

*(Please turn to page 2)*

## Irish Christmas

*For centuries, candles in the windows of cottages and homes have been one of the signs of the holiday season in Ireland. Pages 4-8 contain some stories about Christmas among the Irish there and in Connecticut. — And to all our members, our best wishes for a holy and happy yuletide and year 2021.*



# Tales of Thanksgivings in Plymouth and in Bridgeport

(Continued from page 1)

ered. Then the little band of Pilgrims with the Indians, sat down to a great feast. This was the first Thanksgiving kept in New England ...”

As small as this gathering at Plymouth was, it grew in the succeeding years to be remembered and repeated, first in Massachusetts, then in all New England and eventually in homes throughout the entire nation. It was a holiday which became immensely popular because it emphasized such basic human wants and needs as brotherhood, socializing, acceptance of those of all races, colors and religious beliefs, and above all of reaching out to others who are in need.

Two hundred and fifty years after that first Thanksgiving, an Irish immigrant in Bridgeport, CT, risked his life on Thanksgiving Eve to prevent a disaster that was with in just a few seconds of taking the lives of many Connecticut and New York people.

There is no connection between the Pilgrim and Indian celebration and Dennis Colgan's lifesaving act except that each played out on Thanksgiving and in each case the storyline involved people reaching out to help others in difficult times and perilous situations.

Dennis Colgan had come to America from the British Isles as had the Pilgrims. He was a native of County Westmeath, the son of Margaret Leavy and Thomas Colgan. One record indicates he was baptized on March 1, 1828, at Killucan, a post town just east of Mullingar and 30 miles from Dublin.

While the exact year that he immigrated seems to be uncertain, he was in Bridgeport in the early 1850s, one of the million refugees who fled from the Great Hunger in Ireland. He found work as a bridge tender in Bridgeport on the mainline of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad.

At about the same time, another County Westmeath native, Catherine Mullally, immigrated and found her way to Bridgeport also. She was born in Milltown just a few miles north of Killucan. Whether she and Dennis knew each other in Ireland or not, they were married on April 23, 1863, in Old St. James Church, the first Catholic church in Bridgeport and became the parents of six children.

Bridge tenders had none of the glamor of

some railroaders — engineers and firemen riding in their cabs and brakemen climbing along the roofs of boxcars. But in one aspect, tenders were critical for the safety of passengers. They were responsible for opening drawbridges over rivers to allow boats to pass through and responsible for promptly closing the draws so that trains could safely pass over the bridges.

The mid-section of a draw or swing bridge was mobile, attached to the two end sections by a mechanism which could be released. Once released, the mid-section could be swung sideways to open a space for tall ships to pass through after which the mid-section was swung back in place and securely fastened again.

On May 6, 1853, 45 passengers died in Norwalk when a train from New York to New Haven plunged into the water through an open drawbridge over the Norwalk River. A baggage car, two mail cars and two passenger cars followed the engine into the river. The cars were not crushed and the victims drowned. The tender was exonerated, but an inquest held the engineer guilty of gross negligence.

Years later, Dennis Colgan on two occasions prevented repetitions of the Norwalk disaster. Similar to Norwalk, the rail line crossed the Pequonnock River in downtown Bridgeport. There a draw bridge in mid-river, known as the Center Bridge, made it possible to keep traffic moving safely on both rails and the river beneath.

The first time was on June 28, 1867. “Dennis Colgan, who for 13 years has been the draw tender at the Bridgeport bridge, is a brave fellow and deserves promotion,” reported the *Hartford Courant*. “On Friday afternoon, the express train from New York only escaped destruction through his heroism. The draw was open and the signal set correctly, but the engineer of the advancing train took no notice of it, and came on at his usual speed. By the greatest exertion the bridge was swung into place, but as the track strikes the draw at a curve on the west side, a train coming on to it from that direction would swing it open inevitably, unless it was locked.

“Knowing that, Colgan ran across the bridge in the face of the advancing train, in spite of the cries of a number of persons who told him to get off the bridge and look out for himself, and dropping in front of the

engine succeeded in locking the bridge ...”

So close was Colgan to the engine that the engineer thought he had run over him, and many other of the onlookers believed he had been struck. Instead he survived by sliding off the bridge into the river below.

Five years later, Colgan saved another train at the same bridge. That time it was on Thanksgiving Eve, Nov. 27, 1872. The usual number of commuters was multiplied that evening. They were crowded into 14 passenger cars heading up out of New York City to celebrate the holiday and enjoy a long weekend with their families throughout Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

Near the depot in Bridgeport everything was hustle and bustle with streets and sidewalks filled with carriages, hacks, pedestrians waiting to board and family members waiting to greet their arriving relatives. Meanwhile, out on the river, Colgan opened the movable section of the bridge to allow a lumber barge to pass through. He also lowered to bridge level a warning signal that was a stop sign for train engineers — a red two-foot diameter ball ordinarily suspended from the top of a 40-foot pole.

While the barge was passing through, the express train from New York City arrived at the depot a few minutes later than its 7 p.m. schedule. Passengers exited and entered quickly. Conductor Ward Nichols gave the signal and engineer Edward Gilbert blew the whistle and edged away from the platform. As the train picked up speed and neared the bridge, Gilbert failed to see the warning signal put into place by Colgan.

The *Bridgeport Farmer* reported, “Colgan saw the train approaching and at once appreciated the danger of the situation. With what intensity he must have watched both the passage of the boat and the oncoming train as with his hands on the lever he waited in almost breathless suspense for the heavily laden ship to get out of the way so that he might close the draw and thus prevent a frightful loss of life.

“Slowly the boat wended its way, and faster and still faster became the speed of the approaching train. The yawning chasm stood with huge jaws extended wide and ready to swallow up the train with all its precious cargo ... A few moments at most and all would go over... Some 100 or 200 persons who were waiting to cross had

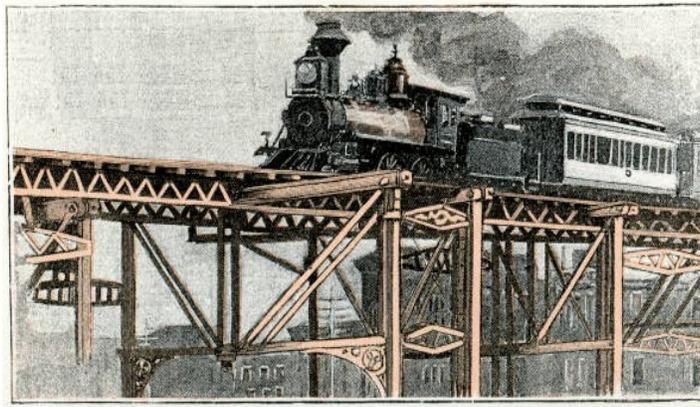
gathered at both ends of the draw. Seeing the danger they ran pell-mell one over another or turned their backs so they might not witness the fatal leap of the train into the angry waters below ...

“At length the barge passed through and now Colgan plied himself with all his might to loose the draw and save the train. By an effort almost superhuman he swung back the heavy draw in time, and ran to wedge it. When he reached the end of the draw the engine was within a few feet of him and it was now too late to drive the wedge ... He planted his lever hard against the rail and held the track in place while the train went rolling by. Five seconds later in forming the connection or the slightest shrinking in the face of danger on the part of the draw tender and the train would have plunged into the horrid chasm.

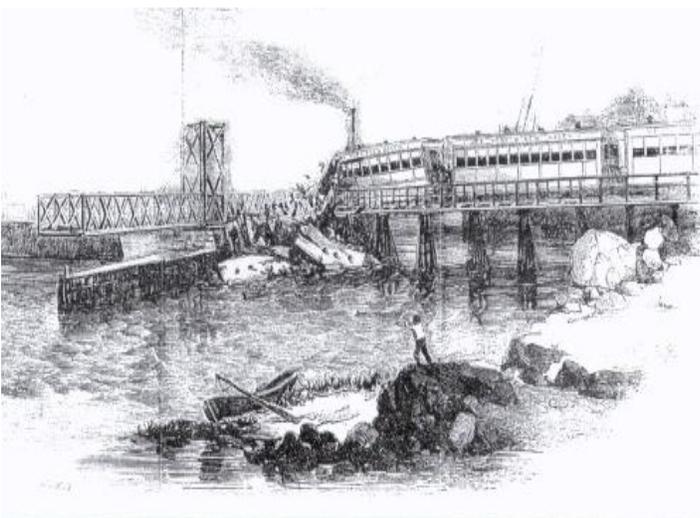
Throughout the state Colgan was hailed. One person standing in a crowd near the bridge declared, “We did not suppose it was in the power of Mr. Colgan to save the train, but he was at his post, braving every danger even to the loss of his own life, to save that precious load of human beings and send them along with safety to be on Thanksgiving with families and friends ... We say that to this faithful Irish draw-tender the passengers on that train owe their lives.”

A letter to the *Hartford Courant* stated, “The particulars of the narrow escape of hundreds of passengers on board the train from New York to New Haven ... have thrilled and shocked many hearts of those who had friends in those cars returning to spend Thanksgiving with them.

“Our hearts beat quicker and quicker almost to suffocation as we now read and think over the fearful leap which that train would have made except for the presence of mind of one man, an employee of the railroad...”



*Railroad bridges over rivers in the 19th century frequently were built with swings or draws in the middle so that they could be opened and closed to allow boats to pass through. The picture below shows what could happen when for some reason the swing was not closed. The sketch was drawn on May 6, 1853, when 45 passengers were killed because a train plowed through an open swing in the bridge over the river in Norwalk, CT. A similar incident was unfolding on the bridge over the Pequonnock River in Bridgeport on Thanksgiving Eve 1872. That disaster was prevented by the quick and courageous action of an Irish immigrant bridge tender.*



The *Milford Telegram* editorialized: “All Honor to the Brave; The name of Dennis Colgan, the faithful and brave bridge-tender, ought to be held in everlasting remembrance ... Be thankful to this man for his courage and presence of mind in an alarming emergency, but still more thankful to Him, who bestowed upon his servant that coolness of nerve and that strength of muscle but for which that train would have

gone down in one awful wreck, sending sorrow and gloom to a hundred homes ...”

When some people questioned Colgan’s actions, a reply promptly came from a group of those who had watched from the end of the bridge itself: “We ... do depose and say we were standing at the east end of the drawbridge ... that Dennis Colgan closed the draw with great rapidity and immediately ran to the west end of the draw, signaling with his lantern for the train to stop and by means of a crowbar hardly pressed against one of the rails held the draw in position until the train had passed ... There were standing at the east end... at the time about 40 or 50 persons including ourselves and that all were greatly terrified and ran back on the foot-bridge apprehending a fearful catastrophe.”

Perhaps the most moving response to the events on that Thanksgiving Eve was that of a Protestant minister, the Rev. Edwin Johnson, pastor of the South Church. He had been the poet of his graduating class at Yale. Several weeks after the bridge incident, Johnson preached about Dennis Colgan in his Sunday sermon. He closed the sermon by reading a 15-stanza poem he had written to honor the bridge tender. The final stanza read:

*Ye that cherish brave deeds of the lowly,  
Keep his name in your memory bright,  
Who, with courage heroic and holy,  
Hath achieved such deliverance tonight.*

Colgan remained the bridge tender for the rest of his life. He died at the age of 63 of a heart attack on March 14, 1893. “For 38 years,” one obituary recalled, “he has been draw-tender at the railroad bridge and he has saved hundreds of lives at the crossing ... which is the most dangerous in the city.”

Another newspaper titled his obituary “Death of a Modern Horatius,” in memory of the famous Roman warrior who at a bridge over the Tiber River successfully defended Rome against an entire invading army.

A sign of the impression left by the bridge tender’s courage is that in 1950 — 78 years after the event and 57 years after Colgan’s death — the *Bridgeport Post* retold his story in an article about memorable residents of Bridgeport in the old days.

## Christmas on a farm in Ireland in the 1940s

For those who enjoy Irish history and culture, the book *An Irish Country Christmas*, by Alice Taylor, makes ideal reading during the holiday season, if possible by the fireplace and with Irish pastries and Irish tea or whiskey. The author of numerous memoirs and novels, Taylor was born in northern County Cork in 1938. In her Christmas book published in 1995, she draws upon her memories as a nine-year-old girl on her family's farm. She traces the December activities leading step by step to Christmas eve and day.

**Holly Sunday** — An early event — “Even though our house was surrounded by trees, we had no holly tree and going for the Christmas holly meant a major excursion ... We divided our team into climbers, catch-

ers and wrappers. The climbers had to cut or break off the pieces of holly ... My father's saw squeaked and scraped ... so the branches were severed by a combination of sawing, cracking and twisting ... The cream of the crop bore red berries and so long as we had enough red-berried holly for the Christmas candle & crib we were happy ...”

“The next item on the agenda was ivy, and the collection of this was done from the ground. We caught the tail end of long strips that were growing up along the big trees ... The ivy was much softer and easier to handle than the holly and when we had sufficient we wound it up into large hoops ... All that remained for collection was the moss for the crib and the base of the Christmas tree ... the best bits grew up along the trunks of old trees.”

**Christmas Eve** - “We gathered in a semi-circle around the window where the candle rested on the deep sill. The world outside was dark and when my father cracked a match the flame was reflected in the window pane. When he put it to the candle it sputtered but then slowly reddened and a yellow flame kindled ... My mother had the bottle of holy water ready and she sprinkled us liberally ... The lighted candle was the symbol that Christmas was finally here. The magic of Christmas was out in the moonlight with the cattle and down the field with the sheep, but most of all it was here in the holly-filled kitchen with the little battered crib under the tree and the tall candle lighting in the window.”

*(Please turn to page 8)*

## Family of 13 immigrated at holiday time

The Christmas season was well underway when the passenger ship *Egypt* slipped past Sandy Hook and sailed into New York harbor on Monday, Dec. 8, 1879 after a nine or 10-day voyage from Liverpool, England.

The ship's last stop had been at Queens-town in County Cork to take on Irish passengers, mostly in steerage. When it sailed off for New York, the *Egypt* was carrying 325 immigrants.

When the passengers came down the gangplank at New York, talk of holiday shopping and Santa Claus took a back seat to conversation about a family that hailed from Kenmare in County Kerry. One paper reported that Dennis Downing “attracted a large share of attention this morning with his wife and 11 children. The oldest was about 15 years old and the youngest six months ... So numerous a progeny for one so young (he is about 40 years of age) attracted attention,”

The 11 Downing children included: Richard, 17; Bridget, 15; John, 14, Daniel, 13; Mary, 12, Patrick, 11, Agnes, 9; Connor, 7; Dennis, 5; James 3; Nora, just six months.

The attention they received must have been a Christmas gift for them. They had sailed from a country in chaos and landed in a nation of opportunity. Times were especially bad in Ireland. Crop failures in Ireland in 1877 and 1878 threatened to ignite another famine such as in the 1840s. Rents were high and evictions multiplied.



*The Downings left their homeland on the ship Egypt, shown above, in late November 1879, arrived in New York on Dec. 8 and by Christmas were in New Hartford.*

Whether they already had relatives or friends in Connecticut and planned to go there or whether their story in the newspaper just caught the eye of a businessman, they soon had an invitation to come and settle in Litchfield County.

The *Hartford Courant* reported on Christmas Day that the businessman unnamed but identified as “the proprietor of the large cotton goods mill in New Hartford ... has sent his agent to New York to hire the man.”

The cotton goods mill in New Hartford — the Greenwoods Company — was indeed large and prospering. Its roots went way back to 1841 when John C. Smith of East Haddam opened a small mill on the bank of the Farmington River in New Hartford. By 1849, business was so good that a 32-foot high dam was built. The power it provided enabled the company to manufacture cot-

ton duck, paper felts, twine, cotton belting and other heavy cotton fabrics. The company's looms could handle cloth up to 220 inches wide for tent and sail cloth. Its customers included the U.S. Army for tents, U.S. Post Office for mailbags and America's Cup racing yachts. By the 1880s, its payroll grew to 800 employees.

Apparently, the Downing family came up to New Haven on the evening boat from New York City a day or two before Christmas 1879. The *New Haven Register* reported, “All but the child next older than the baby alighted unassisted. While the family were waiting for the 10:38 train on the canal railroad, they were surrounded by a group of admiring travelers. Their neat and healthy appearance won them many favors. Generous ladies brought little books, chatterboxes and the like for them. The father purchased six loafs of bread and a loaf of cake and fed them with it, cutting the bread into fragments of sufficient size to lessen the cravings of the youthful appetite.”

When the 1880 census was taken just six months after the Downings arrived, they were settled in New Hartford. The town had 3,302 residents with the Irish-born totaling 313, almost 10 percent. Agnes, age 40, was keeping house. Dennis, age 42, was listed as “laborer,” probably in the cotton mill. And of the 11 children, seven were listed as working in the cotton mill: Richard, Bridget, John, Daniel, Mary, Patrick, and Agnes, at the tender age of nine.

# Irish recipes from a Belfast grandmother

Over the years, Irish culture has flourished in every season and in every nook and cranny of Connecticut. At Christmas time in the 1950s, a columnist of the weekly *Lakeville Journal* reminisced about her grandmother from Belfast and revealed her recipes for Irish scones, bannocks and honeyed rice pudding for holiday events.

Lakeville is a village within the town of Salisbury in the north-west corner of the state. Up until the mid 1800s, it was called "Furnace Village" because it was the site of one of the earliest iron furnaces in the nation. As did all heavy industries, the furnace attracted Irish immigrants looking for job opportunities.

Claire Barcher Ackerman wrote a weekly column under the monicker of "Country Gourmet." Her headline on Dec. 9, 1954, was "Tea-Time in Ireland." She began it with a Celtic saying that means "Oh my," or "Alas, alack."

"Oh, wurra, wurra, that I couldn't have been going to that Irish export tea last month to which I was invited. The newspaper food editors and radio and television food commentators were there in full force at the home of food writer, Vivian Reade May, New York City. After I sent my RSVP regrets they wrote me about the foods that have been served — McCarron's Irish ham, Irish honey, McGrath's Irish blend tea and two brands of Irish fruitcake — the Gate fruit and cherry cake and Thompson's Blarney fruit cake.

"Mrs. Donal Scully, wife of the Trade Consul of Ireland, poured tea and served hot buttered scones, kindly agreeing to share her recipe with me, so I'll give it to you today. Delicious!

My own grandmother, on my mother's side, came from Belfast, in the north of Ireland — Nora Barlow, was her name, and she used to tell about the hospitality of that lovely Emerald Isle, especially in the country — the old white house melting into the gathering dusk, the never-to-be-forgotten smell of peat smoke curling from the chimney — you know that sweet smell you find

in Harris tweeds, especially in a damp day — the tweed woven near the peat fires.

"She spoke of the brittle hedges in the crisp Irish autumn, and the slap of the wild fuchsia branch as one passed through the gate — the glow of the peat fire seen through the open door, the good talk over hearty tea and good food; the faces of friends in the flickering firelight, the sparkling diamond — and strawberry — cuttings

of the Waterford glass on the sideboard.

"Forever sealing the scene in memory, the all-pervading scent of the peat fire, the twin smells of steaming tea and hot scones, dripping with fresh



country butter.

"Wouldn't you have another cup of tea now?" Remember the old Irish saying, when you brew tea — "The pot must go to the kettle on the hearth, never the kettle to the pot." A limp sad tea-bag is no match for that hearty Irish tea so strong you can stand up the spoon in it!

"Beehives in Ireland have quaint gabled rooms, four-walled, the honey is from the fragrant multicolored moor flowers that lure the questing Irish bees. Irish cooks use it in many of their favorite dishes.

"They say that every Irishman is a poet at heart, and small wonder, with such beauty on every side — the beauty of Ireland's waters, immortalized in song and story; the beauty of the soft green of her glens and vales, the misty beauty of her heather moors, her mountains and her undulating woods.

"As for feminine pulchritude, you have only to think of the blue eyes, the black hair, the porcelain skin of any Irish beauty you have seen. Those deep blue eyes, the thick black lashes, dark as though drawn with a smutted finger. It is no wonder they inspired the pen of a Thomas Moore and the phrases of many an Irish poet.

"Maybe your damask tablecloth was woven in Belfast, where the finest linens in the world have been woven since the 17th century, through the introduction of new and improved methods by the many

French Huguenots, who sought refuge in Northern Ireland after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Belfast is known throughout the world for her linen, as well as for shipbuilding and whiskey production."

Only after that wistful and delightful reminiscence of her grandmother and of Ireland, did Ackerman return to the present with a "Well, now to our recipes, the first of which is —

## Irish scones

2 cups sifted flour  
1 small teaspoon salt  
About 1 cup thick sour milk  
Half teaspoon baking soda  
4 tablespoons butter

"You can use four teaspoons baking powder and about three-quarters cup milk in place of soda and sour milk. Mix and sift dry ingredients. Work in butter. Add milk slowly (amount varies), to form a stiff dough. (When sour milk is used, the dough should be stiffer than a sweet milk dough). Knead well. Roll out and cut into triangles. Brush with milk. Bake in hot oven, (400 degrees) for 15 or 20 minutes.. Some of that Irish honey or sweet butter ought to be good atop.

## Bannocks

"Mix 2 cups of flour, 1 teaspoon salt, 2 teaspoons baking powder, and 2 teaspoons powder, and 2 teaspoons of sugar. Add water or sweet milk, and 1 tablespoon lard. After mixing, place in an iron skillet, coated with fresh bacon drippings. Hold skillet up over a low fire or coals until the bread starts to rise, then cook about 40 minutes on edges of coals or in the oven, with a slow heat.

## Honeyed rice pudding

"Here is where you can use that Irish honey, and by the way, if you want to try the Irish honey, you can buy it for about 85 cents a pound at B. Altman, or Macy's, both in New York City.

"Wash 3 tablespoons natural brown rice and spread on bottom of buttered casserole. Mix 1 quart of milk 2 tablespoons honey and half teaspoon salt and pour over rice. Now sprinkle in 2 tablespoons seedless raisins. Bake in moderate oven for one and a half hours. Chopped apricots or dates may be used instead of raisins.

# Irish Santa Claus spread cheer for 40 years

In the mid-1900s, a Santa Claus whose grandparents were immigrants from different places spread the joy of Christmas to literally thousands of Connecticut girls and boys. Santa look-alikes come and go, but this one — Jack Connell — had a spectacular run. Born in Willimantic in 1930, Jack was the son of Daniel and Lydia Dubois Connell. Daniel's father and mother were both born in Ireland and Lydia's parents were of French Canadian birth.

When he grew up, Jack was truly a Jack of many trades. He owned a gas station, ran a taxi service, was a deliveryman for Sears appliances, had a hot dog stand and operated a trash disposal business.

But his favorite career was in playing the role of Santa for upwards of 40 years. He said his interest in doing that began about 1948 when he found amid the trash he collected a Santa Claus suit that someone had discarded. He cleaned the suit up, put it on and passed out lollipops to children at his gasoline station.

"It just took off from there," Connell explained years later. He began to play the role in department stores, schools, rest homes for senior citizens and any organization that wanted to celebrate the joy of the season. On Christmas Eve, he even went around to the homes of friends and neighbors delivering gifts.

He got so much pleasure and satisfaction out of it, that he drove a truck with a license plate that read "OSanta," and a bumper sticker with the words, "Santa's on board." When he renewed his driver's license, he changed the picture to display himself wearing a red stocking cap.

As he grew older, Connell also resembled Santa Claus. One reporter described him as "the jovial rotund Connell with a head of snowy hair and a full bushy white beard. ... To top it off, the guy has twinkling eyes and rosy cheeks. And wouldn't you know that when he laughs, it almost sounds like 'Ho, Ho, Ho'"

Another reporter wrote in the same vein, "Transforming himself into a convincing Santa takes Jack Connell very little time. His beard is already flowing and white. His bushy mustache, eyebrows and hair frame a rosy, full face and it doesn't appear he needs much artificial padding to fill out his Santa suit."

"But these are not the only reasons Connell is a natural to play king of the elves,"

the same reporter pointed out. "The guy just loves kids."

In the early 1980s, Connell found a new outlet for his Santa Claus ventures. The Valley Railroad, a modern day replica of a line founded 100 years ago, began in 1970 to offer rides along the Connecticut shoreline on a vintage train. About 1980, the line began a North Pole Express during the holiday season. What would a train with that name be without a St. Nick? And who in Connecticut but Jack Connell would fill the



**Essex Depot**  
Where: At Exit 3 off Connecticut Route 9.  
When: This weekend and next. Fridays at 4, 7, and 8:15 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays at 1:15, 2:30, 4, 7 and 8:15 p.m.  
How much: Adults \$3, children under 12, \$1.50.  
Who: Valley Railroad Co., Essex, Conn.

part? For the following 26 years, he did just that, entertaining families and fulfilling the fondest wishes of their children while the train shuttled along the Connecticut River from the depot in Essex to the shoreline at Old Saybrook and back. "Riding the train is an any-time family diversion, but at Christmas everything becomes special," said the railroad's advertisements.

Cathryn Domrose of the *Hartford Courant* painted a word picture of that special event that drew thousands every holiday season: "In the late afternoon twilight, green and red and white Christmas lights around the

Essex railroad station twinkle like light colored stars," Domrose wrote. "The great locomotive at the head of seven antique coaches blows a puff of white steam, lets out a self-important whistle and chugs slowly along the track. On board, several hundred children respond with screams, squeals and squirms of delighted expectation. The Connecticut Valley Railroad's Christmas train — the North Pole express — is on its way.

"On a recent Saturday, about 1,500 passengers from Connecticut and nearby states rode the train ... Inside the cars tinsel garland and strings of lights hung above wicker and red metal seats. The din and clatter of children bouncing, laughing, talking and singing Christmas carols never stopped ... as the train rumbled past fields, forests and backyards where other youngsters stopped romping to stare reverently as it passed.

"Tiny passengers rose on their seats to glimpse Christmas visions — gingerbread men, churches, bells, poinsettias — painted on boards set up along the way. Their shiny faces, snug beneath the winter caps or swathed in scarves never strayed far, though, from the door of the car where they knew, the sprightly man in his familiar furry red suit could appear at any moment."

Finally, with his brass bell clanging and with elves scurrying behind carrying baskets of huge candy-dotted cookies, Santa Connell made his way through all six cars bestowing good cheer and making sure to listen and have a special message for each child.

Along the way, Santa suddenly turned with alarm and looked out the car window. "Keep your eyes on those woods out there," he told the children, "and you probably will see Rudolph and his reindeer." And within a few seconds, to the delight of the children, there appeared on an outcrop rock a team of deer made of wood and lighted by electric wires, courtesy of the railroad.

Jack Connell died at the age of 81 on Oct. 3, 2012. His obituary mentioned his various business connections and added, "He was well known for playing Santa Claus, which he did for 26 years for the Essex Steam Train Railroad. Jack also loved to go boating and fishing."

A funeral Mass was celebrated at St. Joseph's Church in Willimantic and he was buried in St. Joseph Cemetery in Windham.

# Memories of a Christmas spent in occupied Germany

*Editor's note: With its last issue, the Shanachie resumed a practice that began 30 years ago of publishing in each issue an article about people other than Irish. The purpose is to emphasize that along with being proud to be Irish-American we are no less proud of the contributions in our nation's history of people of all races and ethnicities. The article and illustration on this page tell the story of how a German mother who lost two sons in World War I opened her home and her heart to make Christmas dinner for three Connecticut doughboys in the occupation army.*



When World War I ended on Nov. 11, 1918, it was time for rejoicing. But it did not mean a quick trip home for American troops in Europe. For a New Haven man, who was a sergeant in an artillery unit near Adevanne in France, it resulted in a Christmas even further away from home.

On Nov. 20, the sergeant, who was unnamed, and his unit were ordered to begin a forced march — 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. each day — into Germany to serve in the occupation army. The doughboys crossed the border on Dec. 2, not knowing how they would be received by German people.

On Dec. 17, they arrived at their assigned station, the village of Nohn, a hamlet of about 50 homes on the edge of the Black Forest in southwestern Germany. There he and two buddies, whom he identified as “Skinny” and “Deacon,” spent their Christmas thousands of miles from New Haven. Years later the sergeant reminisced about that Christmas in a story in the *New Haven Register* on Dec. 25, 1938.

“Came Christmas day,” he wrote, “cold, clear and delightful, I awoke tumbling out of bed, shut the windows, and told Skinny and Deacon to ‘Rise and shine, it’s Christmas.’”

“On the way to breakfast, I stopped and looked around. Yes, it really was a great day to be alive. The Black Forest was a veritable fairyland as the trees gleamed and sparkled in the sun with their limbs covered with snow, the little village with its low-set houses, their roofs piled high, with pure white banks of snow.

“ After breakfast, we went to the stables

to groom and water our horses. Deacon said, “This is the first Christmas in my life I ever manicured a horse.”

“The villagers greeted us with ‘Frohliche Weihnasten’ and we replied, ‘Merry Christmas.’ It seemed as though the hate and killing of the war, so rampant a few short weeks before, were all but forgotten in the spirit of the day.

“All orders were dispensed with on Christmas so all we had to do was talk and reminisce about other Christmases back home, of our girls, our hopes, what we planned to do when we returned home, of the gifts we were not going to get.

“The good frau in whose house we were billeted brought us up some ‘lebkuichen’ — spiced ginger cake — and talked to us as best she could about ‘Kriskingel’ — Santa Claus ... She gave us some steaming pudding and we thought our German to be pretty good for just eight short days. I thought at the time how foolish the order against fraternizing was, especially on a day like this.

“This good woman had lost two sons in the Great War and here she was doing her best to make three lonely American soldiers happy in her home away with a few little cakes. We reciprocated by giving her all the ‘seife’ — soap — which we had: it seemed as though it was worth its weight in gold to the German populace.

“We all went to church to a nonsectarian service presided over by a Jesuit priest who had been with us through thick and thin. We all idolized him ... Officers and men turned out and after the service, he distributed chocolate ... It’s hard to believe but nothing ever tasted as good as that piece of chocolate from the father ...

“After dinner we gave our horses a good feed of fine old German hay and some oats and prepared to go back to our billets when my commanding officer called me aside and said that Santa Claus had left a present for myself and my two buddies in his riding boots.

“After investigating, we found out it was a few bottles of good old delicious Rhine wine, Moselle, vintage of way back. We returned to our billets, borrowed a few glasses from our genial landlady and as we guzzled the sparkling nectar talked of many things.

“That Christmas afternoon as I looked out of the window over the little village, the thought occurred to me of the difference of a few weeks. Here was a country untouched by the hands of war, well-kept towns and villages ... The contrast with the devastation and shell torn towns and cities in France in which we had fought and lived was indeed great

“It’s a long, long cry from Christmas 1918 to Christmas 1938 and the up-and-coming young black-haired soldier has become a fast thinning, gray-haired veteran.

“But as Christmas arrives and another milestone in my life passes, I sit back and think. I would gladly give up my turkey dinner, my gifts, even my job if I can only turn back the hands of time to that memorable Christmas day 20 years ago and that snuggling little hamlet on the edge of the Black Forest in Germany with my old war buddies ...

“ After all, Christmas is what you make it, whether it’s Nohn or New Haven. and we made that one in Germany a day we will never forget.”

## Irish Country Christmas

(Continued from page 4)

“Because it was cold that night, my mother lit a fire in the small iron grate beneath the white mantelpiece in the bedroom. We sat on the floor around it in our long flannel night dresses ... Our minds were full of the wonder that during this very night Santa’s mysterious figure was going to be really here in our house...”

“A candle in a white enamel sconce sat on the mantelpiece above us and joined the firelight in casting shadows along the low timber ceiling. We were reluctant to leave the pool of warmth to run across the icy-cold lino on the floor and into the still colder beds ...”

**Christmas Day** — “When I awoke the room was full of darkness and absolute silence ... ‘Anyone awake?’ I whispered. ‘I

am,’ came a voice ... ‘Will we go down and see what he brought?’ ... We groped our way in the darkness along the narrow landing ... We tramped down silently, breathless with anticipation and I was glad of the comfortable warmth of the kitchen where the Christmas log still glowed under the crane ... Bulging stockings hung off the crane ... We forced the lumps out of the stockings, squealing with delight as oranges, crayons and colored pencils popped forth. Then the packets on the floor yielded storybooks, a snakes-and-ladders game, two jumpers and a new school bag ...”

**Christmas Mass** — “As we walked up the hilly winding boreen that led from our farmhouse to the road, I was glad that we were out early on that Christmas morning. The stars sparkled high in a dark-blue sky and Christmas candles saluted us from the windows of the houses on the hills that stretched away into the Kerry mountains ...

“As we walked up the steep hill to the church we were joined by people hurrying in the same direction ... We blinked in the blaze of light inside and the high white marble altar ... was bright and festive with red-berry holly. From the choir high up in the gallery came waves of exuberant Christmas carols ... Father Roche wished us all a happy Christmas and welcomed home the emigrants ...

**Christmas breakfast** — “Before she left for second Mass, my mother issued more instructions than a departing general ... When we had the kitchen to ourselves, our first priority was the baked ham in the center of the table ... We always had ham for our breakfast on Christmas morning ... Gradually the goose made her presence felt when she started to sizzle and sputter in the bastable and filled the kitchen with a smell that promised great things later on ...”

## The Shanachie

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*In Ireland, a Shanachie is a folklorist,  
historian and keeper of the traditions of the people.*

“We have kept faith  
with the past;  
we have handed  
a tradition  
to the future.”

*Padraic Pearse*

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