

Comments on "Giants Among Men"

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Coming to America

John J. McGraw's father was John William McGraw. On November 8, 1850 the ship *British Queen* entered New York harbor, made its way up the East River and docked at one of the South Street piers on the lower eastside of Manhattan. On board were Irish immigrants fleeing the final stages of the Potato Famine that had ravaged the tiny island of Ireland since 1845. Three of those passengers were Mary Ryan McGrath¹ and her two sons Michael William, age 7, and his younger brother John William, age 6. The family had come from Upperchurch parish in Co. Tipperary. Mary was about to be reunited with her husband, Edmond McGrath, who had come to America alone almost 2 years before the rest of the family.

In the early 1850s the family settled in central New York in the southern part of the town of Fabius in Onondaga County. Michael and John attended the Bardeen School for a while and then when the family moved a little further south they attended the Kenney Settlement School. These were the traditional one room school houses but they provided the young McGrath boys with an education that had been denied Catholics in Ireland for many years. Michael gained a reputation as a scholar with excellent skills in mathematics. Although records of John's academic abilities have not survived he was afforded the same educational opportunities as his older brother Michael and therefore cannot be considered uneducated.

The McGrath Family Moves to Morgan Hill

By the time of the NYS census in June 1855, Edmond and Mary McGrath and their two sons were living on Lot 76 in the Town of Truxton, the present day Town of Cuyler. Geographically their farm was located on the eastern side of Morgan Hill. The hill extended north and south with the Truxton Cuyler border running along the western side of the hill. Life was not lonely for these new arrivals. The Irish had been landing on American shores in record numbers during the famine years. After establishing a foothold these first families became magnets for family, friends and neighbors still in Ireland. The central New York area where the three counties of Cortland, Onondaga and Madison come together was filled with Irish families who originated in the area around Upperchurch parish in Co. Tipperary.

Although today it is the site of a state Reforestation Program, in the 1850s and 1860s Morgan Hill was populated by Irish farmers who were related or were soon

to be related through marriages among their many children. The outline of their long abandoned farms can still be traced out through the silent remnants of the stone fences that they constructed around the borders of their properties. These fences were one of the many traditions that the Irish brought with them to America.

John McGrath Joins the Union Army

Colonel Henry Barnum had just received authority to recruit the 149th New York State Volunteers from Onondaga County and those efforts began on August 24, 1862, with Company I being recruited in Fabius, Syracuse and Otisco². Shortly after his 18th birthday, John W. McGraw enlisted in the 149th at Fabius, New York on August 29, 1862. John was mustered in at Syracuse on September 18th and the regiment left on September 23rd. His career with the 149th was short lived and on October 23, 1862 John was transferred to Co. D, Battalion of the U.S. Engineers.

John W. McGrath grew up on Morgan Hill just a couple farms away from his future bride Ellen Comerford. Ellen was only eight years old at the time John joined the army and it is doubtful if he had really noticed her although perhaps young Ellen had noticed him. After receiving his honorable discharge on August 23, 1865 at Willet's Point, Long Island, NY John McGrath returned home to the Cuyler area in late August or early September 1865.

Morgan Hill to Labrador Hill

John moved back in with his family and worked on the family farm and for a while on the farm of Patrick Gleason up on the northern end of Morgan Hill. During the inflation that followed the Civil War land prices rose. Railroads made it possible for farmers to ship their products to the larger cities where there were markets for them. In this manner, many farmers were seduced by the short-lived promise of selling their excess farm production as a means of covering huge annual mortgage payments on property they had purchased at inflated prices.

Edmond McGrath and his two sons purchased 255 acres of land on Labrador Hill in the adjacent township of Truxton on Lots 51 & 52 on January 6, 1868 for the princely sum of \$10,000. Sometime later Edmond, Michael and John brought in cousin Thomas Sheahan to be a part owner of the property. These lots were located off the West Hill Road on the northern end of Kettlebail Road in the northwestern corner of the Truxton township. Tully was the nearest village of any size and that was where Edmond and Mary McGraw maintained their post office box.

John Marries Ellen Comerford

Patrick Comerford, Ellen's older brother, was one of John's best friends and perhaps that was how he finally came to notice young Ellen Comerford. Eventually Ellen Comerford and John McGraw got together and they were married shortly after the 1870 census was taken. This was the first marriage for

both of the former Morgan Hill neighbors. Their first child, a daughter named Mary, after the paternal grandmother, was born in 1871. On April 7, 1873 their second child was born, son John Joseph McGraw. In attendance was Dr. Judson C. Nelson one of the Truxton village physicians. He would later be implicated in a family tragedy that would take place in another ten years.

John J. was named John after his father and Joseph after a grandfather back in Ireland according to John's wife Blanche in her book, *The Real McGraw*. Exactly where Blanche picked up the "grandfather back in Ireland" information is still a mystery to all of us.

The Great Depression

The Panic of 1873 began in September of that year and set the stage for the financial ruin of the McGraw family. However, the economic situation in the country had been declining for some time. Earlier in the year, on March 18th, 1873, Edward Miller, who held the mortgage on both McGraw farms, sold out their cattle, probably to cover a missed mortgage payment on the Culyer property. The winter of 1873-4 had been a long, cold one and worse than most could remember. In April 1874 Miller foreclosed on the Culyer property that Edmond had retained when he moved to Kettlebail Road in 1868. The fact that Edmond had mortgaged the Culyer property to Miller in March 1872 can be seen as an early indication of his worsening financial condition.

The end came on August 14, 1874 when Miller foreclosed on the 255 acres on Kettlebail Road. The foreclosure auction was held "at the front door of the premises in Truxton, NY"³ and the property went to the mortgage holder, Edward Miller, who made the highest bid of \$6000. After this the family scattered and it wasn't until the 1880 census that their various residences could be determined with certainty.

Most of these events from the early years were not passed down through the family oral traditions. Perhaps out of embarrassment or perhaps in an attempt to just put the distressing events of the early 1870s behind them the McGraw family collectively forgot to pass on the stories. The only children at the time were Mary and John J. and they were too young to remember any of the events. Even my grandfather who was born in 1890 thought that the family had come to Truxton in 1875 and mistakenly interpreted that to mean that the family had come over from Ireland in 1875. In reality they probably moved into the village of Truxton for a while after the foreclosures while they worked out their next move.

The Family Begins to Recover

In the wake of the foreclosures John went to work for the railroad. At sometime prior to 1880 John McGraw had purchased the Welch farm on Shackham Road about a mile up the hill from the North Road turn off. It was a small farm, only 1-1/2 acres in size, and it backed up to Shackham Creek where there was a saw mill operating from the runoff of a man made dam. By 1880 John and Ellen and

their growing family moved down the hill and purchased a farm on the North Road next to Ellen's brother Patrick Comerford. It was located on the east side of the road just across from old school house No.2 where the McGraw and Comerford children attended school. John's parent's Edmond and Mary moved into the Shackham Road farm and perhaps were living there for a while with John and his family.

Michael, John's older brother, was still single in June 1880 and working as a hired hand and living on the James Miles farm. It was located on Skyhigh Drive on the border between the towns of Tully and Fabius in southern Onondaga County.

The Summer of Birth and Death

In the summer of 1883 John and Ellen McGraw were looking forward to the birth of their eighth child. They already had 3 boys and 4 girls. Their oldest was Mary who was 12, John J. was 10, Anna was 8, Catherine 7, Patrick 5, Margaret 3 and James Michael 2. Women had their babies at home in those days and sometimes a doctor assisted or perhaps a midwife. Helen A. "Nellie" McGraw was born on July 29, 1883 attended by Dr. Judson C. Nelson. One month to the day later Ellen was dead. "The cause of death was perimetritis, an inflammation of the membrane covering the uterus, which was apparently a result of the childbirth a month before her death, or an extension of it. Most likely diphtheria was a contributing factor."⁴

Within the next month three of John and Ellen's children would die from diphtheria. Five year old Patrick died first on September 7th. His oldest sister Mary died five days later on September 12th at the age of 12. Seven year old Catherine was the last to die, passing away on September 28, 1883. This must have been devastating for the young family. In the space of 30 days they had gone from the heights of excitement over the birth of the newest family member - sister Nellie - to the depths of despair after losing their mother and three siblings and all the while wondering if they would be next. It must have occurred to them that after the next trip to the cemetery they might not be among those walking away.

Was there an epidemic in the valley during the summer of 1883? The tradition in our family had been that the McGraws (they were buried under the name McGrath – the original Irish spelling) died from bad well water. Patrick and Elizabeth Fitzgerald Comerford were the nearest neighbors of John and Ellen Comerford McGraw that summer. They too had a child born that summer, in August, but no one in their family succumbed to diphtheria. According to Blanche McGraw, in her book *The Real McGraw*, Dr. Judson had been suspected as the carrier of the diphtheria because he had recently treated a couple diphtheria cases in families living in the hills around Truxton.

The Family Moves into the Village of Truxton

John McGraw, the grieving widower, found himself with five children to raise and three of them were four years old or younger. John J. was now the oldest child in the family but at the young age of 10 he wouldn't be much help raising the younger ones. Besides, he and his 8 year old sister Anna would be in school during the day. Out on the North Road the farm houses were separated by distances that were too great to allow the neighbors to easily look in on the younger children during the day. At the urging of family, neighbors and friends John McGraw moved what was left of his family into the village of Truxton. They moved into a 2 story frame house in the center of the village located on the north side of Main Street across from the Truxton House Hotel. Here it would be easier for him to find help caring for the children during the day when he was at work on the railroad.

At some point over the next few years John J. moved across the street to the Truxton House that was run at that time by Mary Goddard who let him work around the hotel for his room and board. The youngest, Nellie, was raised by John's brother Michael and his wife Alice Rooney McGraw. Ellen Comerford's niece Ellen O'Brien Carr took one of John J.'s sisters, probably Margaret, the middle sister. The others were eventually farmed out to other family and friends until John McGraw was alone.

John McGraw's Second Marriage

In 1890 John McGraw married once again. This time to Mary Rooney, the older sister of his brother's wife Alice who had emigrated from Co. Down, Ireland in 1888. He had been renting a farm out on West Hill Road or the Tully Road as it was also known and he purchased the farm on Nov. 26, 1890 just nine months after his marriage. This farm is usually identified mistakenly as where the family was living when the diphtheria struck them. As the elder members of the family commented to me in recent years, "that marriage just didn't take." They didn't divorce and perhaps that was due in part to both of them being of the Catholic faith. John and Mary separated and in 1910 and 1920 they were both living in the small village of Truxton but they were living apart.

The Village That Loved Him

The baseball details of John J.'s early years seem to have been recorded with far more accuracy than those related to his family life. Therefore, I will suffice it to say that his father never approved of his ball playing. Others in town encouraged young John, including Bert Kenney who bankrolled the beginning of John's professional career. After the 1914 season, when John J. made a trip around the world to promote baseball to the world he invited Bert Kenney to join him. His father is never mentioned again in connection with his famous son's baseball career. Although his father lived until 1927, well past the prime of his son's illustrious career, I don't believe he ever saw a game or watched his world famous son lead his New York Giants at the Polo Grounds.

John J. McGraw loved Truxton and Truxton loved him. At the end of the season he would send the Giant's old uniforms up to Truxton for the local team to use. For years there was an old Giant's uniform in our attic that my father claimed had been given to him as a boy by John J. himself. Along with the uniform came an invitation to come see him about playing baseball when my father was big enough to fill out the uniform. It must have been one of John J.'s own uniforms because it was HUGE. John had little reason to worry about my father showing up at his Polo Grounds office because even as an adult the uniform was still big on him.

Four and a half years after his death the Giant's came to Truxton on August 8, 1938 to play the Truxton Giants in a benefit game to raise funds for a monument to John J. McGraw that was to be erected in the center of the village. The four-sided stone monument, engraved and topped with a large sculptured baseball, was dedicated in 1942 and is located only a few yards from the former location of the Truxton House. John lived at that hotel as a young boy and honed his baseball skills in the open field behind the hotel.

The monument remains there to this day welcoming visitors to the sleepy little village of Truxton where John J. McGraw is still fondly remembered by relatives and friends alike.

Notes:

For more details see: McGraw, Michael F., *The McGrath Family of Truxton, New York*, March 2002 (<http://home.austin.rr.com/mfmcgraw>)

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From "Giants Among Men"	
1. McGraw's father was a dull man of no luck.	John's father was a hard working farmer and sometimes railroad hand who had some bad luck. He injured a finger during his service with an engineering division of the Union army during the Civil War for which he tried for many years to collect a pension from the government. He was foreclosed on a farm that he owned jointly with his father, brother and cousin. His young wife and three children died within 30 days of each other. But he did have a support system of family and friends that stepped in to help his young family after he moved into the village of Truxton.
2. Emigrated from Ireland circa 1856	Arrived in New York City on Nov. 7, 1850 with mother Mary Ryan McGrath and brother Michael.
3. Drafted into army – had no heart for it.	Enlisted four months after his 18 th birthday in August 29, 1862 at Fabius, NY – he wasn't drafted.
4. Married and lost a wife to child birth.	Not between the time of his army discharge and the time he <u>returned</u> to Truxton (Cuyler).
5. Broke, a widower, migrated north to Truxton, NY.	Returned to his family's farm in Cuyler, NY on Lot 76, alone and single in late August or early September 1865 immediately after his discharge from the army.
6. Got a railroad job.	Went to work on family farm and later on the Patrick Gleason farm also on Morgan Hill.
7. Married Ellen Comerford	Late 1870. First marriage for both.
8. First child John Joseph – April 7, 1873.	John was second child. First child was Mary born 1871.
9. Ellen would bear seven more babies.	Six more babies. Eight total – John J. was 2 nd born.
10. Large family rarely a meal ahead of hunger.	The latter part of the 1870s saw a global depression that started with the Panic of 1873. Until the depression of the 1930s this 19 th century depression was known as the Great Depression.
11. Awful winter of 1884-5 diphtheria came to Truxton.	The winter of 1884-5 might have been awful but the McGraw family members died of complications from childbirth and diphtheria in

	Aug. – Sept. 1883.
12. Ellen Comerford fell to it.	On her death certificate Ellen's death is attributed to perimetritis, an inflammation of the membrane covering the uterus.
13. So did four of John's brothers and sisters.	John lost two sisters (Mary and Catherine) and one brother (Patrick) in addition to his mother.
14. That fall (1885) – John was 12 – left home and school.	In the fall of 1883 John was 10 years old. His move to the Truxton House is given relative to his family's deaths. Once he became a "town boy" he could attend school with the rest of the town kids at the Union Free School. Mary Goddard had promised his father that young John would attend school. ⁵
15. Scratching out a living, he lived for baseball.	John lived at the Truxton House at the invitation Mary Goddard who was running the hotel at that time. Rather than scratching a living he did chores around the hotel to earn his keep. However, he did live for baseball
16. By 16 he weighed 105.	John was always of small stature.

¹ In Ireland the name was spelled McGrath and when spoken by the Irish it sounded like McGraw.

² Piering, Christopher, Article from the "Jewish Observer," *Civil War Contributions of Syracuse's Jewish Community*, <http://www.122ndnewyork.com/jo.html>, 10/9/2003.

³ Cortland County Records, Cortland County Courthouse, Cortland, NY. Deed Book 57, p. 376.

⁴ Currie, Doug, *A Genealogy of the McGraw's of Truxton*, 10 Jan. 1994.

⁵ McGraw, Blanche, *The Real McGraw*, edited by Arthur Mann, David McKay Co., New York, 1953, p. 34.