

# The Story of the Search for Mary Ryan's Cottage

By Michael F. McGraw

Revised February 17, 2003

## Background

Gleninchaveigh is a rather small townland in Ireland consisting of some 113 acres situated in the rolling green hills about a mile west of the village of Upperchurch in the North Riding of Co. Tipperary. Mary Ryan McGrath was living there with her husband Edmond McGrath and children Margaret and Michael when their third child, John William, was baptized in the old Roman Catholic Church in the village of Upperchurch on June 24, 1844.

After their marriage at Upperchurch in 1841, the Edmond McGrath family was living in Drumdiha where their first two children were born in 1842 and 1843. There is evidence that shows that Edmond and Mary were moving around prior to arriving in Gleninchaveigh. The tax rolls from November 1843 showed that an Edmond Magrath and a Michael Magrath (probably Edmond's father) were living in the townland of Moyaliff in the civil parish of Moyaliff. Edmond and Mary's son Michael was baptized at Upperchurch on November 19, 1843 and the parish records showed their residence as Drumdiha. Therefore the move from Drumdiha to Moyaliff, located only two miles to the east, must have taken place in late November 1843. Within seven months they had moved again and were in Gleninchaveigh by June 1844.

In a property valuation taken in 1851 about a dozen other Magrath (McGrath) families could be found living in Moyaliff parish, located just south of Upperchurch parish. The exact nature of the relationships among these families remains to be sorted out but certainly some of them must be relatives of Edmond McGrath.

In the decades preceding the Great Famine, Co. Tipperary was the scene of many "outrages." The newspapers from that time document the agrarian unrest that gave rise to such groups as the White Boys. These secret groups wandered the countryside by night administering their own brand of justice for grievances real and imagined that could not be brought to the local courts. The favorite targets of these roving groups were land lord's agents and individuals who came to occupy land that had previously been occupied by a local family who had recently been evicted for nonpayment of their rent.

Reliance on the potato crop had allowed small parcels of land to support large Irish families, but there was still not enough land to go around as these children grew up and wanted to start families of their own. The prevailing conditions of more population than land were most likely

responsible for Mary Ryan McGrath and her family coming to live with her brother Jeremiah in Gleninchaveigh. The beginning of the Potato Famine in 1845 is perhaps partially responsible for the small size of their family by Irish standards.

The precise reason for Edmond's decision to seek his future in America has not been passed down through the generations in our family, but the opportunity to secure his own land must have weighed heavily in that decision. It made sense for Mary to remain with her brother's family when Edmond traveled to America in the late summer of 1848. It was two years before Mary and the rest of the family would join Edmond in America in November 1850. Daughter Margaret didn't make the journey across the Atlantic with her mother and two brothers. The nature of her fate has never been determined and it was only through the parish records that we became aware of her brief existence.

### **The Search Begins**

My grandfather died in 1979 and during the following year two other members of our family's oldest generation also died. As often happens, it was the loss of these sources of invaluable family historical information that started our family's first serious genealogical research efforts. A baby book from 1948 had captured some important family information. Several relatives plus my sister Shirley had started tracking down various family records to answer that elusive question: Where did we come from? The name Upperchurch showed up on a baptismal record for John W. McGrath, my g-grandfather's younger brother. That record had been held for us all those years by the U.S. government in John's Civil War pension records. When one tries to get money out of a government agency it always seems to generate a thick paper trail.

The Upperchurch lead, found in the pension records, led to Father O'Meara, the parish priest in the village of Upperchurch during the 1980's. He still had the original hand written parish record books that dated from 1829 in his possession. It was through the kind efforts of Father O'Meara that we found out about Margaret, Drumdiha and Gleninchaveigh. In many cases the old record contained the name of the townland where the parents were living at the time of their child's baptism. The Irish Census records prior to 1901 were destroyed in a fire in The Four Courts building in Dublin during the Irish civil war in 1922. That loss has left these fragile church records as one of the few connections for many people with their Irish ancestors.

Our family's trail back to Ireland heated up in 1981 when my sister Shirley came across the name Upperchurch in a magazine. In an article called "A New Day for Ireland" in the April 1981 issue of National Geographic magazine, there were a few paragraphs about a man named Con Ryan. He was a dairy farmer living in the townland of Glown (Gleninchaveigh) just west of Upperchurch.

The townland of 113 acres contained four houses that were built by his great-great-grandmother early in the 19th century for her four sons, according to the article. There were only four Ryans listed in the Griffith's Valuation for Glown in 1851, Eleanor, Jeremiah, Martin and Patrick. It seemed reasonable to assume that Eleanor Ryan was Con's great-great-grandmother and Jeremiah, Martin and Patrick were three of Eleanor's four sons. It turned out, from Con and cousin Michael Quinlan's research, that Jeremiah was Mary Ryan McGrath's brother. We originally thought that Eleanor might also be Mary's mother but the actual relationship turned out to be a bit more complicated. Shirley had found this article back in 1981 and she had written to Con in 1983 but never received an answer.

My interest in genealogy started in earnest after our family's first trip to Ireland in June 1997. During that trip we had made an uneventful stop in Upperchurch on a gray, chilly, rainy afternoon and had come away with a few pictures but very little useful information. In 1998, 15 years after the first letter, I sent a second letter to Con Ryan, telling him about some of the more recent information that I had found but again no reply was forthcoming.

### **Finally a Response From Con Ryan**

A couple of years later we were planning a return trip to Ireland for June 2000. The itinerary included two days in the Upperchurch area to scout out possible relatives and to visit with the parish priest to do some research in the parish records. In February 2000 I decided to try once more to contact Con Ryan. Since we hadn't received any reply to either the 1983 or the 1998 letters we didn't know if either of the letters had gotten through. It was possible that Con might have been deceased or maybe he wasn't interested in finding any long lost relatives. This time I decided to send Con's letter to the parish priest and asked if he would pass it along to Con. By May I still hadn't heard anything, so I sent a short note to Donal Cunningham, the Upperchurch parish priest, to see if he had been successful in contacting Con Ryan. To hedge my bet, I also sent a copy to one of the local pub owners figuring that Con would be known by at least one of them. Before Father Cunningham could reply to my second letter, I received a fantastic letter from Con Ryan, about 10 days before we were to leave for Ireland. Talk about just in time!

According to Con, the first two letters had found their way to him, but they had subsequently been lost before he could reply. He said later that perhaps it was fortunate that the first letter got lost because in 1983 he was convinced that we were not related. He was descended from John (died ~1829) and Eleanor Ryan and none of their descendents had emigrated. After receiving the second letter in 1998, he again did some research but was unable to turn up a connection. The third letter, delivered via Father Cunningham, was the magic letter. This time Con enlisted the help of his neighbor and cousin Michael Quinlan, who was also descended from John and

Eleanor Ryan. They were able to determine that there had been a Jeremiah Ryan also living in Glown and that they were almost certain that Mary Ryan McGrath was one of Jeremiah's sisters. In addition, they were able to discover that Jeremiah was related to John Ryan (Con's gg-grandfather) and therefore we were all related to everyone in Glown. The details of the connection are more easily understood by reading Con's letter and looking at the partial family tree that I constructed to outline the Ryan-McGrath connections. Michael Quinlan was able to find the record of a dispensation that had been granted to allow two Ryans, namely Edmond Ryan and Ellen Ryan, to be married. The dispensation requirement meant that they were third cousins and hence there was a common ancestor back several generations but an ancestor who is still nameless at this point.

Con and Michael had also been able to determine which cottage Mary had been living in prior to leaving for America with her two sons, Michael and John, in 1850. It was located next to Con's present home and in fact it was the same cottage where Con was born and raised. Con's daughter, Eileen, her husband, and her two children occupy the cottage today. In his letter Con invited us to visit him and his family when we were in Upperchurch on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2000 and he also promised to "introduce you to all your cousins and hopefully you'll drink tea in the house your ancestor emigrated from."

### **Our Second Trip to Ireland**

On the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> we left Killarney in Co. Kerry and headed east for Upperchurch. I had called the Ryans the day before and talked to Mary Ryan, Con's wife. She had given me the directions on how to find their house. This was important because once you venture outside of the larger towns in Ireland there are no longer any street signs or house numbers and one navigates by counting side roads and intersections. Only an Ordnance Survey map, a good sense of direction and a good compass, because the sun isn't always available in Ireland, can bring you back from a visit to the Irish countryside.

Fortunately, the village of Upperchurch is not very large and there was only one west road leading out of the village. Con and Mary Ryan live in the townland of Gleninchaveigh, Glown for short, but you won't find a sign proclaiming that name when you arrive at your destination. The townland "system," if you can call it that, is unique to Ireland. These names have been in use for many hundreds of years with some dating back before the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In the U.S., we have a county and township system whereas in Ireland this is equivalent to a county and civil parish system. Past the township level there are villages in the U.S. with some being incorporated, or recognized legal entities, and some being unincorporated. The U.S. doesn't have a real equivalent to the townland system like the one that is used throughout Ireland. Townlands are the

rough equivalent of naming individual farms. Certain parcels of lands in the U.S. are sometimes named for the present owner, such as the Casey farm or the McGraw farm, but that would change over the years as the farms change hands. In Ireland, by contrast, the townland designations had survived centuries of invaders and many changes of ownership.

Ironically, the stability of the townland system in Ireland owes its continued existence in part to the political instability that the country has experienced over the centuries. Prior to each new taxation scheme or confiscation of land, there was a need for an accounting of the land. The Civil Survey of 1654, which followed the end of the Rebellion of 1641, was instrumental in the Cromwellian confiscations that sent many former landowners to the Province of Connaught. It also preserved most of the then existing townland names throughout Ireland.

### **Meeting the Ryans**

As Mary had described it, there would be a series of cottages whose ends would face the road and theirs would be the modern house that was facing the road right after the last cottage. This last cottage turned out to be the cottage that was at one time occupied by our ancestor, Mary Ryan McGrath. As we passed by the house, Mary was coming down the sloping driveway waving us in. We must have been easy to spot since we were driving a big, bright red minivan with six people and all our luggage stuffed inside. We pulled into the driveway and Mary took us up to their house where Con greeted us at the doorway. Their home was all on one level, similar in some ways to an American ranch style house, but deeper and with many more bedrooms to accommodate Con and Mary's large family. There was a large family room / kitchen in the back of the house than ran from the left side of the house to about two-thirds of the length.

From the very beginning, Con and Mary made us feel right at home. Con apologized several times about losing the earlier letters but in retrospect he thought that it might have been for the best. With the arrival of each letter, he had done a little more research but it wasn't until the arrival of the third letter and he enlisted the help of his cousin, Michael Quinlan, that they had been able to establish the connection of our Ryans to his Ryans.

We had a very interesting discussion, most of which I have on tape and which I still need to transcribe, about the old Irish ways and the details of the search that he and Michael had carried out. They had used the old parish records with some help from the Family Heritage Center at Nenagh.

### **The Ancestral Cottage**

After feeding us a very nice lunch, which we hadn't expected, we continued our discussions for a while and then went next door to visit with Con and Mary's eldest daughter Eileen and her family. Eileen had met her British husband Richard Atkins while they were both in the Irish/English equivalent of the U.S. Peace Corps. The general conditions in their assigned country caused them to be sick continuously and they felt that wasn't a healthy environment in which to raise a family, so they returned to Ireland and moved into the family cottage. Eileen, Richard and their children Declan and Ruthie lived in the ancestral cottage that was around 175 years old. Eileen taught school part time, while her husband Richard had started a computer center in the village Upperchurch to teach the local folks how to use the new technology.

According to Con, the cottage would have had a thatched roof back in 1850 whereas today it had a metal roof. The cottage was comprised of two large rooms. In recent years, they had divided the kitchen to make two small rooms on the north end for Declan and Ruthie. The kitchen served as a combination family room, dining room and kitchen. The other large room, at the southern end of the cottage, was a more formal living room. When Con was growing up in this cottage, he said that this other room contained all the better furniture and that he and the other children were not allowed to play there. In even earlier times, Con said that the family would have kept the farm animals there.

After visiting a while with Eileen and Richard, and sharing a soda in the ancestral cottage, Noël and I left with Con to visit with some of the other cousins in the area. Con's schedule was already tight but he had told the entire village that we were coming and he said that if he didn't bring us by he would be in trouble with the relatives. Eileen and her family went next door to Con's house to visit with Mary and the rest of our family and to let the seventh cousins get acquainted with each other.

### **Visiting the Other Cousins in Upperchurch**

We took a few pictures of both the inside and the outside of the cottage and then we were off in Con's small car as he skillfully navigated his way around the narrow backroads of Glown and Upperchurch. Our first stop was at the house of Con's cousin, Michael Quinlan, and his wife Nonie. The large concentration of Ryans in northern Tipperary practically guarantees that everyone has some Ryans in their family tree. There were three sets of Ryans marrying Ryans among Nonie's ancestors. We discussed Michael's successful interactions with the Family Heritage Center at Nenagh that had led to the discovery of the connection between our two branches of the Ryan families of Glown. During our visit we noticed that a couple of Con's sheep had made their way through the fence and were now in Michael's backyard. Sheep are great at "follow the leader" and before long there were a few dozen sheep in Michael's backyard. Con had

to call home and have his son send over the sheep dogs. As soon as the dogs arrived, the sheep indicated that they knew who was in charge and they couldn't get back through the hole in that fence fast enough. It was an amazing demonstration of the dogs' skill as we witnessed this field of fleece flowing through the backyard while growing ever smaller and finally disappearing back through the hole in the fence.

Before we knew it, Con was telling us that it was time to be on the move again. He had planned several stops for us in an already busy day. Con and his wife Mary were scheduled to catch a bus in Thurles, about eight miles away, at 2:00 AM the following morning for a ride to the Dublin Airport to begin a trip to San Francisco and Las Vegas. In addition, Con needed to interview a candidate for a town job at 7:00 PM that evening. Our next stop was at the home of another Mary Ryan, one of Con's sisters, who offered us a drink that we accepted, thinking it would be tea. It turned out to be Irish Whiskey, which was fine. Mary told us of her 13 children, 55 grandchildren and 7 great-grandchildren. Then she showed us a picture of her entire family taken at Inch House, which was now owned and operated by members of her family as a restaurant and hotel. She had managed to gather all of them together, had them all dressed up and all smiling at the camera at the same time, quite an accomplishment for such a large group. We thanked Mary and her husband for their hospitality and with Con leading the way we were off once again.

Con grew up knowing these narrow, winding, stone fence lined, back roads and made it look easy as he guided his small car along the road while carrying on a conversation and indicating the local points of interest. Our next stop was at the house of Mary's sister Nora. She was the mother of seven children and was herself born in the ancestral cottage. We had a quick cup of tea and a nice conversation with Nora and her daughter and then it was back into the car again and we headed back toward Con's house. It was approaching 6:30 PM and Con needed to get over to the town hall for the interview that evening but he still wanted to take us down to the cemetery to point out the graves of our ancestors. Once back at Con's house we found the rest of the family and got them packed up and ready to travel. We thanked Mary and Con for their warm hospitality and we headed for the van. Con was headed for the interview and as we walked toward our vehicles, we made plans to meet at the Upperchurch graveyard at 7:30 PM.

### **Meeting the Ancestors at the Graveyard**

Before pulling away from Con's house, we stopped for a few group pictures in front of the ancestral cottage and then headed east toward the village of Upperchurch. As we came into the village on the west road we saw Con and some others gathered in front of the Town Hall. We waved and proceeded down the street to the graveyard. The Upperchurch graveyard was located around the corner and down the street from the large modern Catholic church and just across the

street from Dwyer's store. This little general store has been around for many years – at least since the 1920's during the time of the Irish Civil War. In Ireland some stores also double as the local post office, but this unique store doubled up with the unusual specialty of embalming. Maybe it wasn't unusual given its proximity to both the church and the graveyard, but it made you think twice when purchasing items from the store's butcher.

It was only 7:15 PM as we entered the graveyard and I turned to look up the road and saw Con heading our way, walking quickly down the street. Con had shown up early to guide us around the graveyard. I asked him about the person that he was supposed to be interviewing and he said that he had given her something to read and told her that he would get back to her later. We took a quick tour through the rows of stone with Con pointing out the relevant Ryan graves and me quickly snapping pictures as we went along. I had hoped to find some McGraths, thinking that their smaller numbers would simplify the task. That turned out not to be the case as we found ourselves in a veritable sea of Ryans but I was being led by a most able and willing guide in the person of Con Ryan.

In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a widely held belief in Ireland that if a person found a mineral while they were digging then they would soon be dead. Jeremiah Ryan had been digging around his cottage in preparation for putting on an addition when he found some coal. Shortly after that Jeremiah was dead according to the story that had been handed down in Con Ryan's family. As we stood before the grave of Jeremiah Ryan, my gg-grandmother Mary's brother, Con pointed out that Jeremiah was occupying only one-half of a double plot. After her husband's death in 1860, Jeremiah's wife, Anna Hayes Ryan, had been remarried to another Ryan, named Ned Ryan of Gortnahalla, and she was buried with her second husband in another section of the graveyard. The other half of Jeremiah's plot was available if anyone was interested, Con pointed out.

All too soon our visit was coming to an end. Con and I said goodbye in the Upperchurch graveyard and he apologized once more for losing the first two letters and extended an offer of hospitality to any other relatives who might find their way to his doorstep. As Con headed back up the street to finish the postponed interview, I remained in the graveyard a while longer to take a few more pictures. This was the very same graveyard where the old Upperchurch parish church had once stood and in that church, on September 1, 1841, Edmond McGrath had married Mary Ryan.