

CASS COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES  
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY  
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES  
By Jeannie Watson

# JANE ELLISON

Jane Ellison migrated, in 1859, to Cass County, Michigan with her husband, Hugh S. Garrett, and her parents. She had the frightening experience of surviving the Irish Potato Famine. Her comparisons of what life had been like before coming to America, during the process, and after settling in Michigan, is a sequence of great contrasts. Her life story and Irish woman's point of view provides a rare perception of harsh realities and serious events. The Irish Community of the 1800s is very much a part of Southwestern Michigan's history, and their plight should never be forgotten. They were some of the most desperate of souls, who needed Michigan's opportunities and "sheltering bounty." Jane's life story is a tale of bravery, courage and survival, where only the strongest and most intelligent survived.

Ireland was the poorest country in the Western World in the 1800s, and the way that came about is disheartening. Before they were invaded by the British, Ireland consisted of large clans, which were made up of smaller sub-clans, composed of extended family and friends, who allied together for protection. The country's land had few trees in most regions, was rocky, or had rich dark grassland soil and peat moss bogs (swamps). The farm land was anything but worthless, however. It was wonderful for growing food crops, and did so for eons, so its economy was based on agriculture. The clans were constantly at war over that property, and these battles went on for generations. The Irish were, finally, united under a series of kings, but still the clans fought over constant land disagreements. England, in its quest to create the British Commonwealth of Nations, seeing Ireland's rich farm land, weak national defenses, and vulnerability (because it was warring within itself) decided to invade, and conquered it. The clans were so busy fighting each other, some even allied with the English against their own neighbors. Before the invasion was over, British troops occupied Ireland, and in war "to the victor belong the spoils."

Ownership of most of the Irish countryside was given to English citizens, or a small group of aristocrats who were the "Anglo-Irish hereditary ruling class. Most absentee land owners lived in luxury in London, England, while their lieutenants" ran the estates in Ireland. FUEDALISTIC LABOR FORCES were created of the populous. Ireland's people, many who were once proud land owners and heroic leaders, were divided into a social/economic strata to serve England and her landlords. The Irish workers were controlled by "ENGLISH AGENTS" who ran the estates and lived lavishly. They leased land to "TENANT RACK-RENTERS," the middlemen Irish," who rented large tracks of land to their "lessers." Those LESSRERS" sub-divided the land into a series of smaller sections, that were worked by the PEASANTS. The majority of the Irish peasant people lived, at a subsistence level, on less than 10 acres of land per family, paying high rents and selling their crops to Englishmen who fixed the prices. They held sub-servant to themselves the COTTERS who were landless, and rented from no one. The Cotters worked the small farms, were kept illiterate so they could not rebel, and were the poorest of the poor. The rest of the Irish were organized into a SERVANT, CLASS who existed for one reason only, "to serve their "BETTERS."

Ireland under the British Rule, also, had a gender-biased caste system, which placed the worth of able bodied working men above that of women. The harsh reality was that to be a poor

Cotter female in Ireland, during this era, meant one was "the least valued of all human beings. To be a servant woman was a little better. At least they worked in more pristine environments, and were often educated to fulfill their duties. However, the reality was that Irish women, regardless of their class, married young, gave birth to many children, and lived with constant insecurity. This is not to suggest that the Irish were without honor. Fathers protected their daughters. The average Irishman respected, and defended, the females of his family, community and clan.

Jane Ellison was born in Down, County Down, Ireland in 1820 to Michael Ellison (1782-1860) and Mary Garrett (1792-1860). Her home was a single-room, windowless mud brick cabin with a dirt floor. There was a chimney (most Irish cabins did not have them), and a hinged door. The home was part of a "clachan," (small communal cluster). Her siblings were Orb (1811-1892, who is buried in Union Cemetery), Eliza (1814-1880), Ellen (1817-1903), Jane (1820-1902) and James (1823-1894, who is, also, in Union Cemetery). Her father and brothers were tenant farmers, who rented more land than most, and had received educations, which were necessary to carry out their duties. Jane, her mother, and sisters worked in the local English Agent's household as servants, and had been educated to run his household. They were all literate and highly intelligent, which gave them an great advantage when the Potato Famine hit.

Jane's young life before the Potato Famine was filled with continuous labor. She quietly served as a domestic servant. It gave her, and her family, an advantage because no one worried about what she overheard. She acted as a maid, laundress, part time cook and seamstress.

The Ellison family were better off than most, but the insecurity was always there. She talked of the "summer hunger." It was the point in midsummer when the previous year's stored harvest was consumed or had spoiled, and before the crops were ready to be harvested. Most days, during this time, Cotter women and their children would beg, by the side of the road, for food. It was a highly disturbing memory, and the stress experienced over seeing those dirty, hungry little children crying for food lingered even in Michigan..

When the Potato Famine hit Ireland, Jane's family could not pay their rents, and were evicted from their home and farm. Her mother, sisters and herself supported the family, and clandestinely took food from their master's larder to avoid starvation, while living with other family members. The Ellisons were part of the Garrett Clachan (her mother was a Garrett), and the group had prior experience with famines. The house servants were, also, quietly listening and trying to anticipate how the British would handle the famine. England sent small amounts of aid to Ireland, but were afraid to send to much, because the Irish people might use the resources to rebel. Realizing what was happening, when the chance came to leave Ireland, the Garrett Clachan were some of the earlier groups to escape. They had to walk to Belfast in mass to reach the ships that were heading to America.

Later, historians would call those vessels "coffin ships." The voyage to American was a nightmare of poor sanitation, disease (Chlorea), overcrowding, lack of privacy, and short tempers. Some young males used what little money they had to buy alcohol, and drunkenness resulted in brawls. Garrett Clan leaders and Jane's father, demanded that their women stay in the stifling hot steerage area that they were assigned to protect them from the rowdy males who roamed the decks.

The steerage section was a large space (not a cabin) near the ship's steering gear, where the poorer passengers were housed as one large group. The Garrett Clan leaders threatened to throw overboard any clachan man caught drunk, fighting or abusive. Even fresh air was a luxury, and the

food consisted mostly of left-overs from the higher paying passengers of the first and second class sections of the ship. The dying were buried at sea, because it made more room for the living.

Irish refugees who survived the Atlantic Ocean crossing arrived in New York or Boston (the United State's two ports-of-entry for Ireland). Even by 1857, New York's native population was only 375,000 people and had to absorb 52,000 Irish. Boston's citizens numbered 115,000 and were forced to watch 37,000 Irish disembark. Seventy-five percent of all Irish refugees came through New York. The Ellisons and Garretts arrived in 1845 and were part of the first wave of refugees to arrive in American.

These Irish Immigrants were unprepared, escaping famine, and traumatized. Many were carrying contagious diseases due to forced crowded living conditions, and they had no resources to tide them over upon landing. Without food, a place to live, an understanding of this new culture, or help from anyone, thousands came, followed by thousands more. "Americans were simply overwhelmed" with the flood of Irish refugees, and no humanitarian way to stop the flood of these desperate souls. The Ellisons and Garretts were either going to rise to the challenge or not survive.

At this time in history, America lacked sophisticated Immigration Services. There was no one to guide, or help, the disembarking Irish, besides a few health workers who isolated the ill. With no place to go, most settled along the waterfronts. Soon the few hotels, boarding houses and apartments were filled, so they camped in musty cellars that flooded with the tide, gardens, alleys, streets, and backyards. It was not uncommon for twenty people to live in one single room. They huddled together in conditions even worse than in Ireland. Poor sanitation was a breeding ground for disease, fire safety codes did not exist, and food was scarce. During those five years of Irish immigration, "60% of refuge children did not live to see their 6th birthday, and . . . "the average adult Irishman only lived six years after leaving the ship." There were no jobs available, as "rowdy behavior, boredom and crime increased." Begging, theft, and intense rivalry for survival was the norm." In these conditions "noble behavior dies quickly, and self-respect evaporates. In place of these virtues comes "despair, emotional numbness, and indifference."

Following "on the heels of this Irish suffering, Americans had no way to cope, as a society, with the large number of poor, and anti-Irish sentiment spread." Lacking solutions in those early years, our culture followed the course of human nature, and developed grave biases. The Irish were relegated to the slums, and isolated. There were exceptions, however, and that was what made the Irish men and women who reached Michigan and Indiana so special.

"Fire tempers steel, making it stronger," and harsh living conditions energize the intelligent with the will to survive." According to family notes, Jane's story encompassed all the horrors mentioned, with one shining difference. The Ellisons, Garretts, and their affiliate families did not linger at the New York City waterfront slums. The Garrett/Ellison Clan walked, in mass, out of New York City. There were advised by five old patriarchs: Daniel Garrett (1795-1874) who wed Mary Wright (1815-1899), John Garrett (1799-1862) who married Rosa Petticrow (1807-1878), Isaac Garrett (1787- ) who wed Nancy Strong, William Garrett (1787- ) who married Abigail Ann, and Michael Ellison (1782-1860), Jane's father who wed Mary Garrett (Jane's mother). However, it was the young "Sept Chieftains" (clan leaders) who made things happen. One of the strongest leaders who organized them, focused their efforts, gave them discipline, implemented strategies, and told them they would survive, was tall, broad shouldered Hugh Stuart Garrett (1825-1921).

When the group reached the farmlands of New York west of the city, they were divided into smaller groups and sent out to find work. These brave Irish survivors were employed as farm

laborers, beer brewers, cooks, maids, laundresses, handymen, and did any other job they could find. Then pooling their resources, they rented farm land, and grew their own food. After two years of saving money, hard work, and "learning the lay of the land," they were ready to move ahead. Determining their options, learning how to survive in American, and their own courage was what separated them from those who stayed in the slums of New York City, or died.

The group dispersed with plans to work, save money, and all meet in Michigan in 1859. Jane, her parents, and Hugh S. Garrett's group moved to Ohio, and stayed there for two years. Migrating next to Indiana the process was again repeated for two years to build resources.

It was during these moves that Jane Ellison and Hugh S. Garrett fell in love. Jane and Hugh were married on November 29, 1857 in Franklin Co., Indiana. The marriage produced two sons William James Garrett (1858-1928) and Michael Stuart Garrett (1856-1916).

In 1859, the Garrett/Ellison Clan converged in Southwestern Michigan. The most spectacular point in Jane's story is, of course, that the Irish who reached Michigan had overcome some of the toughest road blocks to success that life had to offer. They did it all with intelligent, hard work, grit, determination, honesty, and inner strength. While others around them lost their humanity, self-respect, and even their lives, these brave souls did the opposite. They behaved with dignity, forethought, planning, patience, and strategic logic. One might even say that Michigan's Irish settlers of the 1800s were noble, possessing great integrity and character, because they never resorted to the the very behaviors that created anti-Irish sentiment in the first place.

The life Jane experienced in Michigan was far different from what she had endured in her past. Her father and husband joined financial forces, enabling Hugh to buy land and a home. Her parents lived with them. Hugh worked hard, and kept buying property, until he owned 200 acres. Jane went from being a poor servant and struggling Irish farmer's daughter to being the wife of a wealthy Michigan land owner. The Garretts and Ellisons became part of Cass County's prosperous farming community, were respected, and were "free to live their live by choice not chance."

Jane Ellison was remembered by the children of the family for her Irish cooking, according to family notes. Those favored dishes were: COLCANNON (potatoes, kale, cabbage, and scallions, well seasoned), IRISH STEW (mutton with the lamb bone included, carrots, pearl barley, peas, celery, parsnips, turnips, onions, butter, thyme, bay), SODA BREAD (bread raised with baking soda), CODDLE (layers of pork sausage, bacon, potatoes, onion), BARM BRACK (bread with candied fruit mixed in), GUINNESS (bitter stout non-alcoholic beverage), BOXTY (Irish potato cakes), BLAA (soft bread), CRUBEENS (salt brined pigs feet with vegetables), IRISH CREAM (a sweet dessert made with the cream of cows), WHITE MEALY PUDDING (oats, suet, pork, fat, stale bread, sheep's brain), BACON & CABBAGE (usually boiled), HARLECH BARA BRITH (a cake like bread), and YELLOWMAN (Irish toffee, a honeycomb homemade candy).

Jane never lost her Irish Brogue. She was a very hard worker, strong willed, stubborn, feisty, and kind-hearted. When asked about her heritage, she would claim to be "English," while Hugh shook his head "no" behind her with a smile. It was probably due to the anti-Irish sentiment she had to endured when she left the ship. She should have been extremely proud of her Irish ancestry. The day did come, when Americans not only dropped their Irish biases, they learned to greatly respect those who survived some of the greatest travesties of the 1700s and 1800s.

Jane passed away in 1902, at 82 years of age, in Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. She enjoyed her comfortable, happy and safe life in Michigan for 43 years. She is buried

with her husband, and family, in Union/Daily/Brookside Cemetery, Jefferson Township, Cass County, Michigan.

In conclusion, Jane Ellison was an Irish refuge who escaped to America during the Irish Potato Famine. She was a survivor and overcome serious life threatening experiences. Jane married Hugh S. Garrett, was a loyal wife, loving mother, and an excellent Irish cook. Settling with her family in Cass County, she found comfort, security, peace and happiness. Her perspective and life story are a rich addition to the area's chronicles. She earned her place in local history.

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## RESEARCH

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