

Biography of Charles (Charlie) John Quinn

In 1869, at the age of 20, he decided to come to the United States - to Chicago, Illinois, where his great uncle, Owen Daugherty (his father's uncle) had emigrated some years earlier, and where he had become the town constable. (Chicago was then a frontier town with a population of about 75,000.) The uncle later became a lawyer and a justice of the peace, with offices downtown on Clark Street.

When young Charles Quinn arrived in Chicago in 1869, the city had grown to a population of over 200,000, largely as a result of the Civil War, which had ended just four years before Charles arrived. (Two years after he arrived, the entire city went up in flames - the Great Chicago Fire of history).

While Charles worked for his uncle, he did considerable traveling for him, all over the United States. He was always proud of having visited every town with a population of 5,000 or more. He learned a great deal in handling his Uncle's business, and soon organized and invested in various businesses of his own and was a classic example of the "entrepreneur".

Among other projects, he took a contract to build the roadbed for the first railroad in Texas - from Texarkana to Temple, and accepted a grant of one-quarter of the town site of Temple in payment in lieu of cash. He also purchased several thousand acres of land in Galveston, Texas, but much of it was submerged in the disastrous flood of 1900, following a hurricane which killed 5,000 people and demolished a great portion of what was a thriving port city.

While living in Chicago, Charles resided on the near north side, and attended Mass at the Holy Name Cathedral. There his eye was caught by a lovely Irish girl. He lost no time in learning who she was -- Mary Jeffers, a recent immigrant from Ireland.

At a parish picnic on August 15, 1880, they became engaged. A few months later, on October 24, 1880, they were married at Holy Name Cathedral. Charles was 31 years old at the time, Mary was 22 years old.

They established their first home in a community that was, at the time, largely Irish. Specifically, they lived at 98 E. Huron Street in Chicago, and it was there that their six children were born, and attended Holy Name School.

Deciding to settle down, now that he was married, Charles started a business with a German immigrant, packaging popcorn doused with caramel which they called "Caramel Crisp". Later, he sold the business to his partner, who thru further partnerships renamed the product "Cracker Jack" and made millions.

In 1881, Mary and Charles became parents for the first time when their daughter, Mary Francis, was born in 1881...followed by Anne (1882), John Patrick (1885), Charles (1887), William (1889) and Henry Michael (Harry) in 1891.

At the time of the first Chicago World's Fair (Columbian Exhibition) in 1893, Charles was the owner of the "Columbia Portrait Frame Company" at the corner of State Street and Lake Street in downtown Chicago. There his company manufactured and sold the ornate picture frames then popular in those times. A book published at the time, called "Prominent Chicago Business Men" included a biographical sketch of him.

In 1900, Charles and Mary purchased a new family home in what was then a newly annexed section of the far north side of Chicago, known as Lake View. Their home was at 1321 Waveland Avenue (3700 north and 1300 west).

However, according to their children, they were not the ideally matched couple, though their home life was happier than most. Charles was an omnivorous reader, a dreamer, a visionary, attracted to the world of business enterprise, but lacking the hard-nosed practicality of money making. Mary, the less well educated, possessed discerning intelligence and innate shrewdness, and was a "people" person. She had little interest in material goods except to the extent they could be put to practical use.

For example, when Charles acquired an interest in a wholesale jewelry business that required him to travel frequently, he often sent home beautiful pieces of jewelry and silverware he found and bought in his travels. Upon his return home, he would learn that his wife had given them away to family, friends and visitors who admired the pieces.

Mary's greatest joy was people...the growing family, newly arrived Irish immigrants and other visitors. Anyone who came to the house enjoyed her hospitality and her good Irish soda bread with a cup of tea.

Sadly enough, the last few years of Charles' life found him losing his eyesight. (probably just cataracts, but at that time cataract removal operations was unknown). In typical fashion, Charles (though in his 60's at the time), enrolled in a school for the blind, learning read weaving, and made several lovely pieces of wicker furniture. He also learned to get about, finding his way around the city, keeping himself sturdily independent. In 1919, at age 70, he was on his way home aboard a trolley car, when he fell and died suddenly of a heart attack - just a half block from his home.

Mary lived on in their home (5 of their children were married by now) with her bachelor son, Charles, Jr. (who married late in life). Mary's days were spent traveling all over Chicago, visiting her children, grandchildren and friends - her favorite pastime. Later on, when Charles married, Mary went to live with her daughter Anne and her family, and was living with them when she died in 1943 at the age of 85.

They are buried together in Calvary Cemetery in Evanston, Illinois.