

## **High Cupboards**

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As a little girl I watched my older sisters getting ready to go to dances with their boyfriends of the moment. The usual procedure was for the guys to come to our house and wait inside until the designated sister appeared. Usually there was pleasant small talk between my parents and the young man. But one evening a very shy fellow arrived at the door. He came into the kitchen, mumbled something, and then leaned against the sink, saying absolutely nothing. After some very long minutes spent staring at the opposite wall, he ventured, "God, them cupboards are high!" Of course we young ones snickered, and just as surely he never made the A list with any of my sisters. His observation, however, was keen. Our kitchen cupboards were very high, floor to ceiling, covering one entire wall except for the doorway to the dining room. The cupboard doors opened from both rooms. The lower and middle shelves held all the ordinary stuff: pans, everyday dishes, and good china in a special place. But the top cupboards were a mystery. I knew my dad's legal papers were there, also his one bottle of whiskey for rare occasions, and a poppy seed grinder. What else? It was a perilous climb to get up there and the penalty for getting caught was HUGE. Snoop as I dared, I never found anything more.

Over the years I have come to believe that our family history is a lot like those cupboards. On the lower shelves there are the well-known stories, the ones we still share and laugh about at family gatherings. And then there is the top cupboard. There are the things unasked and unspoken for many years. Or, if one asked, the answer was "Never mind", or "It was never talked about."

As an adult I have tried to unlock some of those mysteries. Sometimes I found an answer; sometimes I found more mystery. Many of those who knew were no longer among us when I began to search. So I pass on these stories as not complete and not definitive. They are what I have concluded may have been in the high cupboards of Birmingham history.

### **Chapter One The Aunts**

My paternal grandfather, James Patrick Birmingham (1832-1921) and his wife, Bridget Sheehan O'Kieff Birmingham, had 8 children, of whom 4 were daughters. Bridget died when the youngest child was 4 years old. Her death was thought to have been from tuberculosis. The eldest daughter, Bridget Ann, also died of tuberculosis, at age 19.

#### **"Mary Ellen"**

Mary Ellen, the second daughter, married Frank McLaughlin. It was not a happy union. Frank was a well driller by trade, who, according to my father, "never seemed to be able to find a well to drill." What he did find, unfortunately, was an addiction to alcohol. These two problems kept them and their 3 sons in extreme poverty. Mary Ellen became mentally ill and was confined to the Iowa State Mental Hospital in Independence, Iowa for several years. Their sons lived with their grandfather, James Patrick, and were cared for by Teresa, who was then living at home. When Mary Ellen recovered she and Frank and the children resumed their life together, but poverty continued to be part of their life. Their oldest son, James, ran away to California at the age of 15 or 16 and never returned, even when his parents died. The second son, Alphonse, committed suicide as a young

man, leaving a wife and 2 sons. Paul, the youngest spent his adult life in Chicago where he raised his family.

Despite her hard life Aunt Mary Ellen was a charming and witty lady. She and my father, Martin, were very close so we saw them often. Dad used to take them with us (Mama, Cyrilla and me) on the annual trip to Independence to visit their brother, Uncle Jimmy Birmingham, who lived for many years in the state hospital there. Aunt Mary Ellen was always ready to go on these days; Uncle Frank was always grumpy and slow. On one such occasion we waited a very long time in the car for him. Finally Frank appeared from the house, looking as if he'd slept in his suit and wearing a battered felt hat. Aunt Mary Ellen took one look at him and said, in her very lady-like voice, "Frank, where did you get that God-damned son of a b— shitty hat?" Cyrilla and I dared not look at each other; even one of these words would have earned us hours in "the corner" (Birmingham detention). In her later years mental illness returned to plague Aunt Mary Ellen and she died in the State Hospital in Independence.

### **"Teresa"**

Teresa, the third daughter, married Pete Biever, who was also from the Lourdes area. They had two sons, James and Francis. Pete seemed not to understand the part of the marriage vow that says forsaking all others". After a few episodes of infidelity on his part, Aunt Tessie took her boys and went home to her father, James Patrick, on the farm. I never met Pete; when I asked my mother what happened to him she replied, "He just disappeared."

Aunt Tessie spent part of her life in the Lourdes area and several years working in Chicago. She was a strong and determined woman. She and my father quarreled over their father's will and never reconciled. As a result I never really got to know Aunt Tessie until after Dad died. She was a vivacious lady who loved to visit with people. Her quick wit could sometimes be caustic. She was famous as a cook, especially for her molasses and sugar cookies. When it came to Birmingham family history, Aunt Tessie was the Grand Censor. She told you what she thought you should know, rather than what may have really happened. One example is her insistence that my oldest sister, Sister Martin, was born on November 13, 1907, though the birth certificate said it was October 10, 1907. Aunt Tessie died in Lourdes at the age of 90.

### **"Harriet"**

Aunt Harriet Birmingham was the youngest daughter and the youngest child of my grandparents. Grandma (Bridget) died when Harriet was only 4 years old. She was sent to the Visitation Academy in Dubuque for her education. The Sisters discovered her great music talent. After her graduation Harriet wanted to enter the Visitation Order but her father adamantly refused. Instead she taught music in the Lourdes area and eventually in Chicago, where she eventually met a young man named Joe Costa. They married when Harriet was about 40 years old. Together they often visited my parents on the farm. Mama and Dad thought him and charming young man and an excellent Italian cook. What they did not know was that Joe was exercising his charms on several young Chicago women and that he had another wife who was alive and well and looking for him. Eventually the abandoned spouse made a house call to the Costa home. Shocked and heartbroken, Aunt Harriet took her own life in December 1925, at the age of 45.

There is a picture of Aunt Harriet's grave in a Chicago cemetery that I find most puzzling. My father is kneeling on one knee beside the grave. Standing on the other side is Uncle Joe Costa. It is not a new grave; the headstone is in place. Why would my father be photographed with the man whose

infidelity led to the death of his youngest sister? My niece Rose Chihak Schroeder, after seeing the photo, posed one solution: "Maybe Grandpa didn't know the whole story then." Enter Aunt Tessie, who was living in the Costa home when Harriet died. Did she find it easier to blame the death on "depression and poor health"? How did the full story come to light? It was told to me by Sister Martin and by Mildred Sisul, many years later.

## **Chapter 2 The Uncles**

### **"John"**

James Patrick and Bridget had 4 sons: John, James, Martin (my father), and Patrick. Uncle Johnny, the firstborn of the family, was born in Blossburg, Pennsylvania in 1864. (Blossburg is in northeast Pennsylvania, near the New York border.) He came to Howard County with his parents and younger sister and brother, Bridget Ann and James (Uncle Jimmy) in 1868 or early 1869. The Birmingham farm was bought in the spring of 1869. In his early 20's John married Mary Julia Hebig, who was from Cresco. Soon afterward the young couple headed west. They lived in the Oklahoma Territory; some of their 8 children were born there before Oklahoma was a state. Some members of this family believe that John was a sheriff during those years. Eventually the family moved back to New York., settling in Binghamton. John died in 1932 and is buried in Binghamton beside his daughter Cecilia, who died at age 18. The story is that she received a severe spinal injury when she was pushed out of her desk at school onto the floor and never recovered from the injury.

Since Uncle Johnny died when I was 2 years old, I have no memory of him. His grandchildren, whom I met in Binghamton in 1996, related that John had a hot temper and was harsh with his sons. Apparently he and his father, James Patrick, had serious differences; John was omitted in his father's will "for reasons known to me."

### **"James"**

James, the second son of James Patrick and Bridget, was born in 1866 in New York State. Coming to Iowa with his parents he attended country school in the Lourdes area. As a young man he and his brother Martin, my father, were known as the "best-looking young men around." This from a young woman who later became Sister Edward Smith. Soon after 1900 James and Martin traveled to Oklahoma to stake out land in the territory. (The land deed of Uncle Jimmy is dated 1906). Sometime during those years James became ill with typhoid fever. As a result of the uncontrolled fever he suffered severe brain damage. When his mental state became violent he was committed by my father to the Iowa State Mental Hospital in Independence, Iowa. He spent the rest of his life there. On three occasions he escaped briefly and came to my parents' home. One of these episodes I recall, having been about 6 years old. I had no idea who he was. Each time my father returned him to the hospital in Independence, sometimes with the help of the sheriff. In 1944 Uncle Jimmy suffered a stroke and died. He is buried in the Lourdes cemetery. My mother told me he was my uncle and that I did the right thing by bringing him to the house right away. (Years later I learned that he did not like children and that she did not trust him around us).

### **"Patrick Thomas"**

Patrick Thomas (Uncle Pat) was the youngest of the sons of James Patrick and Bridget Birmingham. Born in 1877 in Howard County, Iowa, he attended the local country school, as did his brothers and

sisters. Like his older brother John, Patrick somehow managed to incur his father's disapproval and was omitted from the will "for reasons known to me."

Uncle Pat married Alma Littig, of Westgate, Iowa, on May 7, 1907, just a month after my parents' marriage (he was best man at their wedding on April 3). Patrick and Alma moved to Bismarck, North Dakota, and then to Beach, North Dakota. There Uncle Pat was a barber for the rest of his life. Because he and my father were close friends, they visited us on the farm every summer.

Uncle Pat was a very outgoing and jovial man. He and my dad used to sit in the kitchen late at night, smoking cigars and sipping frugally of that one bottle of whiskey from the top cupboard. They laughed and talked long after we went to bed.

Aunt Alma was much more reserved than her spouse. Perhaps because she had no children, she seemed to be ill at ease around children. Frequently she would caution us or correct our behavior. A very large woman, she would sit in the rocking chair in our dining room doing beautiful cutout embroidery or crochet. One day while she was helping my mother in the kitchen, she asked, "Bessie, where is your spider?" Cyrilla and I were more than alarmed! Later Mama told us that "spider" was a name for an old-fashioned iron frying pan.

In the spring of 1940 (March?) we were stunned to learn that Aunt Alma had died suddenly at age 54. A month later Uncle Pat died at 62. Their deaths were attributed to "throat infection" – at a time when antibiotics were not available. My parents were very saddened by the sudden loss of close relatives who seemed so dedicated to each other and to our family. The two are buried in the Lourdes Cemetery.

### **Chapter 3 My Parents**

My father, Martin Edward Birmingham, was the third of James Patrick & Bridget's four sons. He was the first of their children to be born in Iowa, on November 9, 1869. According to Sister Mary Martin, my oldest sister, Dad was born in a log cabin in Howard County. Though, I was unable to confirm this, my research proved that there were log cabins in Howard County in 1869. Census records indicate that he completed the country school curriculum, and that he lived at home until he went with his brothers, James and John, to the Oklahoma territory to homestead circa 1900, thus began our "Oklahoma inheritance," a story in itself.

On one of his return trips to Iowa, Dad met Elizabeth (Bessie) Faloda, who was working as a housekeeper for his father, James Patrick. Dad evidently envisioned the pretty 19 year old Bessie in another role; they were married in Lourdes in April, 1907. Dad was then a handsome and witty 38 years old. He and my mother, Bessie, lived in a house on his father's property until 1918 when the present Birmingham farm was completed.

Because I was the twelfth of their thirteen children, I knew a very different man from the Dad (called Papa) of my older siblings described. My father was 60 years old when I was born. Six feet tall, slender and erect, he was my idol. No matter how work-worn his clothes were when he came to pick us up after school, I thought he was incredibly handsome. (one of my schoolmates referred to Dad as an "old man"; that ended our friendship). Dad was soft-spoken, very seldom raised his voice and would not tolerate crude or obscene language or gossip. He could communicate his opinion of your behavior in a few well-chosen words. When I was in the 8th grade, two classmates and I decided to play hooky. We spent a lovely September day in the woods west of Lourdes.

However, our idyll ended very abruptly when we returned to Lourdes 15 minutes past dismissal time. My parents, sister and nieces were waiting in the car (my Mother had already met my teacher in the store; Sister had inquired about my "illness" that day). I have no memory of what Mama said. Dad's reaction will forever be with me. He turned to me and said "I'm surprised at you." Four words only – more powerful than a whip, and the end of my career as a truant.

One of my favorite memories of Dad is as a storyteller. When Cyrilla and I were little, he entertained us with stories in the evening while Mama prepared supper. Wonderful, scary tales about Oklahoma, home of wolves and snakes and dangerous bad people, to make us shiver. With one eye on our mother, the stories came to an end precisely when supper was announced.

By the time I was in high school, Dad's health began to fail. In the spring of 1946 all the livestock and farm equipment were sold at auction. With that event Dad seemed to withdraw, as if preparing for another world. He had suffered a stroke that summer. On November 1, we moved to Lourdes. Two weeks later he had a second stroke. Early in the morning of November 20, 1946, Dad left us for eternity. He is buried in the Lourdes Cemetery beside my mother. I was very angry after his death – angry with Dad for leaving us without a father and angry with God for taking him. Many years passed before I learned these are paths grief often takes.

My mother, Elizabeth Antoinette Faloda, was born in Howard County, Iowa in 1888. Her parents, Vaclav (James) and Mary Falolda, were both born in Czechoslovakia, coming to the United States as teenagers. The Czech language was spoken in the home where Mama grew up; she spoke it fluently all her life. Mama loved school and was an excellent student. When she finished elementary school, her teacher thought my mother should continue her education and become a teacher. Mama did not want to do this because "kids make me nervous". Years later she whooped with laughter as she told the story – after raising her own 13 children and two precious grandchildren!

My mother was 42 years old when I was born. I was the only one of her brood to be born in the hospital. Once when I asked her about it, she said, "Well, the Elma hospital was new and Dad wanted me to go there". Years later my brother, Patrick, told me the whole story: life-threatening complications developed, sending her for the first and only time in her life to the hospital.

How to describe the woman who was both mystery and inspiration to me; who did not like any attention focused on her; who asked so little of life and gave so much?

- She was deeply and strictly religious, rising early in the morning to pray.
- She was musically gifted, loved to sing and to dance, until arthritis made dancing impossible. She hummed and sang as she worked, and often sang to us in the evenings. Sitting in her rocking chair she sang songs that were often sad, e.g. A Dying Child; "Mother when I go to heaven, will the Angels let me Play? Just because I am so little, will they say I'm in the way?"
- She had a great sense of humor. When we told wild tales about school, she would laugh until tears came, and then she would say, "You kids are terrible!"
- She was a tough disciplinarian, but not given to corporal punishment for misdemeanors. A quick pinch for antics in church; most often a long session in the "corner". I complained once that my teacher told me I was as bold as a pig. She replied, "Well, Sister is wrong. You are bold, but pigs aren't."
- She was an excellent cook, though she admitted she did not like to cook. So she taught each of her daughters to cook early in our lives.

After high school I entered the novitiate at MJ. St. Clare in Clinton in 1948. My mother came for my reception the following year. She said she would come again in August 1951 for my profession. But, early that year she wrote to say she was coming in February. She did, and we had a happy weekend.

On June 28, 1951, I was called out of my class to be told my mother had died suddenly the previous evening. She was 63 years old. I know then the reason for her visit earlier in the year.

My brother, Al, drove Sister Martin and me to Lourdes for the funeral. We arrived just at sunset. As I watched the sun disappear under the horizon, I thought of how she had slipped away quietly when her work was done. I would not get a chance to tell her how much I loved and respected her. I did not cry over her death until I wrote this story.

#### **Chapter 4 The Grandparents**

A picture on the wall in our dining room on the farm – that is my earliest and only memory of James Patrick Birmingham, my paternal grandfather. This a formal portrait of an elderly gentlemen with white hair and a goatee. He is sitting with 5 young boys, his Biever and McLaughlin grandsons. His expression is stern; you would not want him to catch you snitching cookies.

Because he died nine years before my birth, I have no personal stories about him, but some of my older sisters have shared their memories. They all remembered that he was called “Gran”, even by his adult children. Sister Martin and Mildred remembered having to be very quiet when visiting at his house; otherwise, they sat on the stairway steps. Audrey remembered him bringing them a treat of bologna and crackers from the grocery store. And Dorothy, Mary Ellen and Audrey recalled the solemn procession of horses and buggies making its way to his funeral in Lourdes in January, 1921.

James Patrick was born in Ireland in 1832, the eldest child of Patrick and Mary O'Donnell Birmingham. He came to the U.S. with his parents and younger brother, Thomas, sometime between 1845 and 1847. Where did they live in Ireland? Ship passenger lists are not helpful; they indicate Liverpool, England, as the port of embarkation. How did they get there? The only clue I found is on Mary's (his mother) tombstone in West Union, NY. It says she was born in County Mayo.

Sometime after the NY census of 1855, James P. left his parents' home in West Union township. My mother said he went to New York City where he became a shoemaker. She also knew that he paid \$300 to a man who took his place in the Civil War.

James Patrick next appears on the New York state census of 1865. He is a farmer in Steuben County with a wife, Bridget, and a year-old son, John (Uncle Johnny). Also living in the household is a woman named Ellen Doud, age 65 (more about this strange story later.) The same census states that the marriage between James P. and Bridget was her second marriage. James then owned 124 acres of land.

In 1868 the New York property was sold and they moved to Howard County, Iowa. The Iowa land was bought in 1869. By then there were two more children, a daughter, Bridget Ann, and a son, James. All the younger children, including my father, were born in Iowa. On this farm James Patrick and Bridget would live out their lives.

In remembering James Patrick, it is important to consider the loss of his spouse and daughter in his early 50's and that in his last years he shared his home with a mentally unstable son, two adult daughters and 5 lively grandsons. Can we not excuse the stern look of the white-haired man in the picture?

Bridget Sheehan Birmingham, my maternal grandmother, was born in Monroe County, New York, in 1835. Monroe County is in the far northern part of the state; it is likely that the Sheehan's came to the U.S. via Canada. They arrived in West Union township in 1840. (Clayton's History of Steuben County, NY, 1879) In the 1860 U.S. census, Bridget is listed as "Bridget O'Keefe, age 21", with a 2 year-old son, Jeremi. They are living with her parents, John and Ellen Sheehan. Letters in possession of the New York Birmingham cousins state that her husband, O'Keefe (no first name given) had been killed in an accident.

By the time of the New York state census of 1865, Bridget is listed as the wife of James Patrick Birmingham and the mother of 1 year old John (Uncle Johnny). The O'Keefe child apparently died in early childhood. Three years later Bridget, James and their 3 children made the trip to Iowa. At the age of 49, in 1884, she died of consumption. She is buried in the Lourdes cemetery.

Personal glimpses of Bridget are scarce. I know that she was called Ma (pronounced Maw) by her children. They spoke it in a tone that was almost reverential. I once saw a picture of her at their daughter, Aunt Tessie's house. Her hair was black, parted in the center and drawn back into a bun. Her eyes were brown. Sister Martin and I made several unsuccessful attempts to retrieve that photo after Aunt Tessie's death. My mother recalled hearing a story about Bridget on the farm. She (Bridget) was walking outside when she saw a pig where pigs weren't supposed to be (her garden?). She picked up a rock, took aim – and the pig was pork chops!

A few nuggets of memory – all that remain of the man and woman who planted the roots of the Birmingham's in Iowa.

## **Chapter 5 The Great Grandparents**

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson was busy negotiating the Louisiana Purchase. That same year, somewhere in Ireland, a young Irish couple named Birmingham had a son. The child was named Patrick; I do not know his parent's first names. That son, Patrick came to the U.S. in the 1840s, with a wife, Mary O'Donnell Birmingham and two sons; James Patrick (my grandfather) and Thomas. Did they come to escape the potato famine that began in 1845? Unlikely, because their third son, Daniel, was U.S. born in 1843.

The U.S. census of 1850 records that Patrick and Mary were living in Steuben County, Lindley Township, New York. Patrick's occupation is "laborer". He had also become a U.S. citizen. By 1855 the New York state census lists three more sons; John, Peter and Michael and an infant daughter, unnamed. (Because of the high infant mortality rate, many people did not name a child for the first year. The daughter never appears in later records). Patrick probably worked on the railroad, as did many immigrants to that area.

By the time the 1860 U.S. census was taken, Patrick owner "110 acres of land (value \$1,370), 2 horses, 10 milk cows, 2 working oxen, 9 other cattle, 19 sheep and 2 swine, plus 20 bushels wheat, 25 bushels rye, 200 bushels oats and 80 lbs wool".

Of Patrick and Mary I found only two further items. Mary died in 1869 at age 57, of stomach cancer. Her tombstone gives the only clue to where in Ireland the Birmingham's may have lived. It reads, "Born in County Mayo, Ireland". Patrick died in Buffalo New York in 1878. Possibly he had gone there to live with an adult son. He is buried next to Mary in Old Catholic Cemetery, West Union, New York. Only the name is visible on his tombstone.

John Sheehan, my other Irish great-grandfather, was born in Ireland in 1799. He first appears in U.S. census records in 1850, New York, Steuben County, also. By then he had a wife, Ellen, and two daughters, Bridget, my grandmother, and Mary. Bridget, the older one, was born in Monroe County, northern New York state. It is likely that the Sheehan's immigrated by way of Canada. Clayton's History of Steuben County (1879) states that John Sheehan was the first settler in the area of the county known as the "Big Woods". He came there in 1840 after the completion of the old Blossburg Railroad. By 1855, he was a naturalized U.S. citizen. He was a landowner with livestock and grain also.

In the 1860 census, John and Ellen are sharing their home with their daughter Bridget (now O'Keefe) and a 2 year old grandson, Jeremi. (see story on Bridget). Mary, their younger daughter had died in 1857 at age 16. Two years after the census, John died. He was 62 years old. He is buried in Old Catholic Cemetery in West Union, New York beside his daughter, Mary.

The story of John Sheehan's wife Ellen belongs in a television episode of "Unsolved Mysteries". Census records, federal and state, place her name next to John's as Ellen Sheehan. On the tombstone of their daughter Mary is inscribed, "Mary, dau. John and Ellen". However, after John's death, Ellen appears as Ellen Doud. She was then living with Bridget, who was married to James Patrick Birmingham (1865 New York census Steuben County), but all supporting information – age, marital status, number of children – coincides with previous data on John Sheehan's wife. John's will (1862) leaves his real estate to Bridget and the sum of \$50.00 annually to Ellen Doud. He does NOT call her his wife. In 1868, just before the move to Iowa, the real estate was sold. The sellers: James and Bridget Birmingham and Ellen Doud. Marion Springer, Steuben County Recorder of Deeds and genealogist, summarized it thus; "Of course we cannot assume as fact what we cannot prove, but it seems evident that there was some reason why John and Ellen could not legally marry. That they lived together and had children is proven by the records."

Ellen Doud/Sheehan disappears from records after the New York land sale. No burial place is found in Steuben County. Did she come to Iowa with James Patrick and Bridget? I have a memory about her grave that will not go away. My parents and Cyrilla and I were on a country road somewhere in the Lourdes area. As we drove past an old cemetery, my mother said, "Grandma Sheehan is buried there." But where is "there"? Not in any of the old cemeteries where Irish names are found - Reilly Ridge, 2 cemeteries in Lourdes. My husband, Jim, and I with help from Cyrilla, nieces, Mary Ellen Follett and Rose Schroeder, searched thoroughly. Our only findings had been left there by visiting animals? As the king of Siam said, "It is a puzzlement."

### **Epilogue**

I return to our home on the farm. The high cupboards are still there, just as I remember them. I have with me the Birmingham stories: the aunts; the uncles; the parents; the grandparents; the great grandparents. I climb to the top cupboard – there is no one to stop me. Reverently I place their stories back on the shelf. I bless them and thank them for who they were and for what they did. I climb back down; the cupboard door closes.





## Sources

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