

Sunday, August 15th, 2010 | Posted by Seamus Boyle

Irish Slaves

Brothers, by the time you read this edition of the Digest, the convention in Cincinnati will be another piece of history. As I write this column today I think of history and our ancestors and what they went through for centuries. We know about the forced famine of the mid 1800's and about Cromwell and his murderous deeds and more recently about the troubles of the past 40 years. How many of you know about the slavery of the Irish?

Last month I attended a meeting of the AOH Division 1, Cape May County New Jersey and found out more than I really would have liked to know about the slavery of the Irish people. It is one of the least known atrocities against the Irish nation and one that we all should be aware of.

Although I knew about slavery and the Irish, I could not believe the vastness of this issue over so many years and yet we see very little or none of this in our history books in Ireland or here in America.

I am not going to give you a history lesson (that is Mike McCormack's job and he is excellent at it) but I do want to make you aware of this part of our past and I thank the members in North Wildwood NJ for opening my mind to this part of our history. The following factual events are just the tip of the iceberg and by reading this small part of a book by author John Martin, I hope it makes you feel the need to look further into the subject and pass this information on to your family, children, grandchildren and your friends.

We do take a lot of flack about our nationality and the stereotyping so it is incumbent upon all of us to counter this and this is one way to educate them and possibly shock them by telling the story of the Irish slaves.

They came as slaves; vast human cargo transported on tall British ships bound for the Americas. They were shipped by the hundreds of thousands and included men, women, and even the youngest of children.

Whenever they rebelled or even disobeyed an order, they were punished in the harshest ways. Slave owners would hang their human property by their hands and set their hands or feet on fire as one form of punishment. They were burned alive and had their heads placed on pikes in the marketplace as a warning to other captives.

We don't really need to go through all of the gory details, do we? After all, we know all too well the atrocities of the African slave trade. But, are we talking about African slavery?

King James II and Charles I led a continued effort to enslave the Irish. Britain's famed Oliver Cromwell furthered this practice of dehumanizing one's next door neighbor.

The Irish slave trade began when James II sold 30,000 Irish prisoners as slaves to the New World. His Proclamation of 1625 required Irish political prisoners be sent overseas and sold to English settlers in the West Indies. By the mid 1600s, the Irish were the main slaves sold to Antigua and Montserrat. At that time, 70% of the total population of Montserrat was Irish slaves.

Ireland quickly became the biggest source of human livestock for English merchants. The majority of the early slaves to the New World were actually white. From 1641 to 1652, over 500,000 Irish were killed by the English and another 300,000 were sold as slaves. Ireland's population fell from about 1,500,000 to 600,000 in one single decade. Families were ripped apart as the British did not allow Irish dads to take their wives and children with them across the Atlantic. This led to a helpless population of homeless women and children. Britain's solution was to auction them off as well.

During the 1650s, over 100,000 Irish children between the ages of 10 and 14 were taken from their parents and sold as slaves in the West Indies, Virginia and New England. In this decade, 52,000 Irish (mostly women and children) were sold to Barbados and Virginia. Another 30,000 Irish men and women were also transported and sold to the highest bidder. In 1656, Cromwell ordered that 2000 Irish children be taken to Jamaica and sold as slaves to English settlers.

Many people today will avoid calling the Irish slaves what they truly were: Slaves. They'll come up with terms like "Indentured Servants" to describe what occurred to the Irish. However, in most cases from the 17th and 18th centuries, Irish slaves were nothing more than human cattle.

As an example, the African slave trade was just beginning during this same period. It is well recorded that African slaves, not tainted with the stain of the hated Catholic theology and more expensive to purchase, were often treated far better than their Irish counterparts.

African slaves were very expensive during the late 1600s (50 Sterling). Irish slaves were cheap (no more than 5 Sterling). If a planter whipped or branded or beat an Irish slave to death, it was never a crime. A death was a monetary setback, but far cheaper than killing a more expensive African.

The English masters quickly began breeding the Irish women for both their own personal pleasure and for greater profit. Children of slaves were themselves slaves, which increased the size of the master's free workforce. Even if an Irish woman somehow obtained her freedom, her kids would remain slaves of her master. Thus, Irish moms, even with this new found emancipation, would seldom abandon their kids and would remain in servitude.

In time, the English thought of a better way to use these women (in many cases, girls as young as 12) to increase their market share: The settlers began to breed Irish women and girls with African men to produce slaves with a distinct complexion. These new "mulatto" slaves brought a higher price than Irish livestock and, likewise, enabled the settlers to save money rather than purchase new African slaves.

This practice of interbreeding Irish females with African men went on for several decades and was so widespread that, in 1681, legislation was passed "forbidding the practice of mating Irish

slave women to African slave men for the purpose of producing slaves for sale.” In short, it was stopped only because it interfered with the profits of a large slave transport company.

England continued to ship tens of thousands of Irish slaves for more than a century. Records state that, after the 1798 Irish Rebellion, thousands of Irish slaves were sold to both America and Australia.

There were horrible abuses of both African and Irish captives. One British ship even dumped 1,302 slaves into the Atlantic Ocean so that the crew would have plenty of food to eat.

There is little question that the Irish experienced the horrors of slavery as much (if not more in the 17th Century) as the Africans did. There is, also, very little question that those brown, tanned faces you witness in your travels to the West Indies are very likely a combination of African and Irish ancestry.

In 1839, Britain finally decided on its own to end its participation in Satan’s highway to hell and stopped transporting slaves. While their decision did not stop pirates from doing what they desired, the new law slowly concluded THIS chapter of nightmarish Irish misery.

But, if anyone, black or white, believes that slavery was only an African experience, then they’ve got it completely wrong. Irish slavery is a subject worth remembering, not erasing from our memories. None of the Irish victims ever made it back to their homeland to describe their ordeal. These are the lost slaves; the ones that time and biased history books conveniently forgot.