

# Traveling a rocky road with the “Irish Travelers”

Vagabundi sunt (“They are vagabonds.”) said the record in the old Columbus baptismal ledger, obvious enough for even a rusty Latin scholar to know its meaning. Itinerantes (“Travelers”) another record read. No question there. Newly-baptized infants Mary Sherlock and Hugh Costello were offspring of traditionally Catholic Irish Traveler families.

The Irish “Travelers” (or “Horse Traders”) passing through the Columbus area in the 1880s were probably members of gypsy Irish tinker clans that immigrated from Ireland to the United States in the 1850s.

Monsignor Noel C. Burtenshaw speculated in the March 13, 1986 issue of *The Georgia Bulletin*, newspaper of the Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta, that Georgia’s Irish Travelers arrived “somewhere around 1880.” From that time on, as Monsignor Burtenshaw wrote, “we find this tribe in the Atlanta area and all over Georgia doing exactly what they had done for hundreds of years in their motherland, traveling the roads, trading horses, doing odd jobs, painting houses and possibly selling floor covering.”



Rita H. DeLorme

### An endogamous group

Irish Travelers are said to be “endogamous,” that is, they marry within their own group and marriage outside the group is frowned on. Traditionally, children are home-schooled. For years funerals of Irish Travelers were held annually at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Atlanta. Descriptions of the group in recent times are not always favorable, with local prejudice possibly playing into anti-Traveler blogs and warnings on the Internet. During the summer of 2007, debate about the Travelers volleyed back and forth on City-Data.com.

Countering one Internet attack, a purported Irish “gypsy” responded to accusations of fraud: “For your information there are a lot of

“gypsies” that do work honest jobs. Gypsies are very giving people, yet everyone considers them to be heartless criminals. I will admit that some are, but not all like everyone claims. I should know...I am one.”

While compiling a book about the Travelers in 2001, Sister Rita Kinch saw them in a different light, and noted in an e-mail to Gillian Brown at the diocesan archives that she had recently been on a pilgrimage with some of the Travelers. “It (the pilgrimage) took the form of visiting the five churches in Columbia, South Carolina, and reciting the Rosary in between en route,” Sister wrote. “They collected all the novena leaflets in all the churches, lit candles, visited the shrines, etc. They certainly know how to pray and with tremendous faith.”

### Warning

Religious or not, activities of the Irish Travelers were suspect enough on May 14, 2007 for the Governor’s Office of Consumer Affairs of Georgia to issue a warning headed “Irish Travelers Perpetuate a Tradition of Fraud”. The Consumer Affairs Office warned: “Around the time that schools let out, individuals known as Irish Travelers load up their pick-up trucks and take their show on the road. Sadly, their business is not a very entertaining one and can cost you way more than a ticket to the Big Top. These descendants of Irish immigrants live in nomadic clans and make their living by perpetuating home improvement fraud and selling substandard machinery at huge mark-ups.”

### Murphy Village

The consumer site mentions communities of Travelers throughout the South, terming the enclave (Murphy Village) just outside North Augusta, South Carolina, the largest. According to this Georgia government source, Irish Travelers who head north each spring from their home in South Carolina pose as repairmen to those whose doors they knock on. They offer “sweet deals” and explain their large discounts to potential customers (often the elderly) by saying that they use materials left over from previous jobs. Written contracts for work are rare. When given, they tend to send a disgruntled homeowner on a merry chase from Post Office box to toll-free number to further frustration.

A look at Murphy Village, stomping grounds of the Travelers, may offset this bleak picture of the Irish Travelers. It was in this settlement founded by and named for Father Joseph John Murphy of Charleston, South Carolina, and located across the state line from Augusta that, “for the first time in over 100 years, the Irish Travelers established roots.” (*The Bulletin*, March 13, 1986).

Murphy Village’s Saint Edward Parish is part of the Catholic Diocese of Charleston. It was founded in the 1960s and its current pastor is Father Cherian Thalakulam, CMI. Saint Edward’s Web site carries its mission statement: “As a family of faith and love, we the members of Saint Edward Parish follow Jesus Christ, by being united with Him in Prayer and Sacraments, and by strengthening this union through study and reflection of the Word of God, and

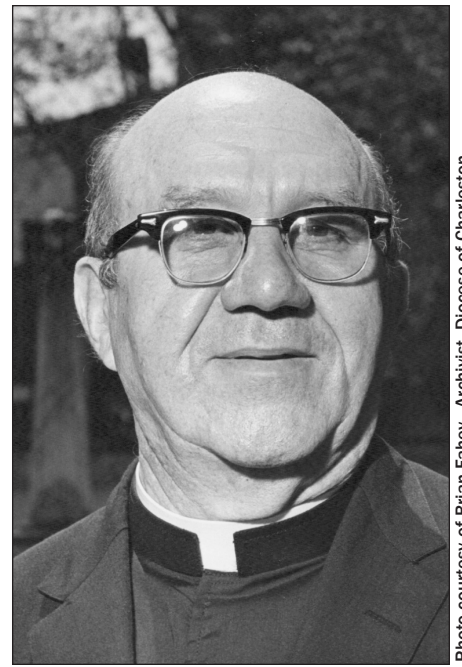


Photo courtesy of Brian Fahey, Archivist, Diocese of Charleston.

Father Joseph John Murphy established the fixed settlement for the Travelers in North Augusta that is named for him today.

by reaching out to our fellow human beings with the commitment to spread the gospel message to all. We thus contribute our share in the building up of the Kingdom of God.”

This statement seems to tally better with old records of Holy Family Church, Columbus, than it does with warnings now dotting the Internet. Tiny Mary Sherlock, daughter of Peter and Bridget Furey Sherlock and godchild of James and Bridget Carroll, seems far removed from such controversy. So does little Hugh Costello, son of Michael and Winifred Casey Costello and godchild of Mary Reilly. Reverend Henry Schlenke, who baptized these “vagabundi” children in the late fall of 1887, would probably be amazed by today’s conflicting views of their descendants.

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## TV Mass Schedule

### AUGUSTA

Sunday, 10:00 a.m.

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### SAVANNAH

Saturday, 6:00 p.m.

Sunday, 5:30 a.m.

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