



Carmelite Spiritual Center

8433 Bailey Road * Darien, Illinois 60561 * 630-969-4141

Rev. Kevin Shanley O. Carm
8433 Bailey Rd
Darien, IL 60561-5305

Life is Worth Giving

CHRISTMAS GIFT WAS FONDLY REMEMBERED

by Fr. Kevin O'Neill Shanley

Uncle Tom was a quiet man who loved people dearly, and especially family members such as my three brothers and myself. He was very much a grandfather figure for us, since we never knew or met any of our grandparents in Ireland. He was also greatly fond of my Mother and looked forward to our visits to his home in the Greenville section of Jersey City, N.J. His home, with Aunt Mary, his wife, was on a bluff overlooking the wide expanse of Newark Bay. Our Family lived in rather cramped quarters in a cold-water flat in another part of the city.

Most Sundays after Mass and our dinner, Mom and Dad would pack us aboard the Public Service trolley on West Side Avenue for the trip to Greenville. As we later raced up Custer Avenue to Uncle Tom's home, we had the exciting feeling of being out in the open with a grand view of Newark Bay.

When we entered Uncle Tom's home, he would most often be sitting near the door to greet us. He'd say to my Mom, "Mary, I felt it in my bones that you'd be visiting today, and welcome."

-more-

✓ Dec 06

CNS/ Fr.Kevin/ XMAS Gift/ 2

Uncle Tom was a diminutive man who had emigrated from Drogheda in Co. Meath, Ireland. He was illiterate but very wise in his own way. Perhaps he felt a closeness to my Mom because they were both outsiders in the family, being in-laws. Years of heavy toil and dangerous work, first as a sand-hog digging the subway and auto-truck tunnels under the Hudson River to New York City, and later as a factory worker, robbed him of what little good health he had. His labors, especially underground, brought on emphysema and other problems.

But Aunt Mary was able to keep the household together with her ^{Irish} education and financial acumen. They couldn't have children of their own but accepted foster children from the state Children's Welfare Office, and raised them as their own. My brothers and I simply regarded these children as our cousins.

The Great Depression

When Uncle Tom lost his job during the Great Depression of the 1930s, he and Aunt Mary, owning their own home, were ineligible for Public Relief, as it was called in those days.

However, they also took in boarders, especially a man we simply called "Uncle Gus." His board money, along with raising vegetables in their extensive garden, getting apples from an abundant tree, ^(AND) raising chickens for eggs, kept Aunt Mary and Uncle Tom able to hold onto their home.

On our often weekly visits to Greenville, Mom and Uncle Tom would often sit quietly to talk about the "old days" in Ireland. She was a Dublin girl who met my Father's family, the Shanleys, on visits to Skerries, Co. Dublin, not too far from Drogheda. Mom had a warm sympathy and affection for Uncle Tom and the great difficulties he had experienced and overcome in life. She encouraged him to continue to seek work, and when he got a job as a night watchman at a small war plant near home, Mom expressed her pride in his achievement and walked with him through the factory. He was proud to show his workplace to all the family.

One of the difficulties that made life more than difficult for Uncle Tom was his fondness for alcohol. It may have been because of his poor health, lack of education, or simply the great difficulties of his life. Whatever the reason, the family tended to look down on Uncle Tom as almost an outcast.

But not Mom. She had already experienced the disease in her own father, and seemed to have more sympathy and understanding for Uncle Tom. He often felt that it was our Mom's kindness, affection, and understanding that helped him through some of his more difficult times.

Christmas Gifts

During the Depression, of course, it was difficult to give or receive presents, especially at Christmas time.

CNS/ Fr. Kevin/ XMAS GIFT/ 4

A single toy or other gift, often home-made, was all that most children, or adults, could expect.

Uncle Tom tried, in his daily rounds of collecting discarded junk, ^(or) empty bottles that could be redeemed for two cents, often was on the lookout for items that could be used for possible gifts.

In one of their many conversations, Mom had mentioned to Uncle Tom her difficulty in keeping her kitchen knives ^{sharp,} especially those used for carving meat and other foods for the Family. Uncle Tom must have made a mental note of their conversation.

Sometime later, not long before Christmas, when he trudged down an abandoned railroad line in Greenville, he spotted a large discarded railroad spike. It could be, he thought, a good instrument to sharpen Mom's knives. Uncle Tom hurried home with his potential Christmas gift for Mom. He carefully dropped it into a pan of kerosene to ~~re~~move the collected rust and other materials that covered the spike. Then he sat down with a chisel and file to remove another layer of rust to bring forth the original iron spike till it looked almost new. Then came the process of sharpening the edges to produce a real knife-sharpener.

Carefully wrapping the spike in some already used Christmas wrapping paper, Uncle Tom began the long journey of walking some three miles to our family flat.

He knocked timidly at our kitchen door, and Mom opened it and greeted him warmly. He sat by the kitchen stove while Mom made him a cup of hot tea. After a little while, he shyly offered her his Christmas present. Mom opened it gingerly, not quite knowing what to expect.

"Oh!" she gasped as she saw the old railroad spike burnished and polished to a useful and bright state.

"I thought it might be useful," explained Uncle Tom, "in keeping your knives and other things sharp. It won't soon wear out."

Mom kissed Uncle Tom affectionately, and thanked him profusely for this very unusual Christmas gift. The railroad spike proved quite useful and remained in the utility drawer in our kitchen for many years afterwards. It was a reminder to Mom of how good and loving a man Uncle Tom really was. And she would often remind her sons of how important a gift at Christmas is — if given with love!