

[Subscribe](#)

The Berkshire Eagle

(/)

[Main menu](#)

A cunning connivance

Posted Wednesday, March 17, 2010 9:08 am

By Kevin O'Hara

Wednesday March 17, 2010

PITTSFIELD

During my donkey travels around Ireland in 1979, I often told stories of home that would not only entertain my hosts, but also open up their pantries. On this particular night I sat in the Burren -- the "rocky place" of County Clare -- with Jack and Maura Casey, an elderly couple proud of their self-sufficiency, buying only tea and sugar from the village shop.

"Have ye any people like ourselves who are self-sufficient in the states?" Jack asked, a robust farmer in his early 70s.

"Oh, yes," I eagerly replied. "I knew a couple who dropped out of their senior year of college and built themselves a log cabin in the Green Mountains of Vermont, all in hopes of becoming self-sufficient."

"A log cabin?" asked Maura, fixing me a ham and tomato sandwich. "Made of timber only?"

"Yep, just like Abe Lincoln's. Have you ever seen one?"

"In this stony paradise?" laughed Jack, looking out his window upon a wild and barren landscape. "The old men in this parish have a hard time coming upon a walking stick, let alone a house of sticks."

Maura placed the thick sandwich beneath my nose: "Please tell us more about this couple, and the Green Mountains." I took a satisfying bite and blathered on.

n

"This couple was married under an apple tree five years to the day after they'd met at Woodstock, the infamous festival of love and music in 1969. They both believed their marriage was aligned with the divine cosmos. In fact, the ceremony was performed by a Justice of the Peace dressed up like a Cherokee chief, and the wedding guests squeezed rose-quartz crystals as the high and happy pair exchanged their vows."

"By God," Jack mumbled, throwing a few sods of turf onto the fire, "they sound more pagan than ourselves."

"Brad, the husband, was a former engineering student who soon erected a windmill for electricity. His wife, Sarah, was an earthy sort who took to raising bees, goats, and a fine organic garden. They almost packed it in that first harsh winter, but there was no stopping them the following summer when they had their first child, a daughter named Astral, that they delivered in their bathtub."

"Their bathtub!" exclaimed Mrs. Casey. "Hadn't they beds to sleep in?"

"Oh, they did," I laughed, "but this was the rage at the time -- the so-called Age of Aquarius -- and these water-babies were believed to go through an easier birth."

The two of them gaped at me in dismay.

"Oh, the tub would've been half-filled with lukewarm water," I clarified, "since they believed infants are born swimmers."

"They'd need to be," Jack said abruptly.

"I'd never fancy doing that to any of our own," gasped Maura in mild horror. "Good Lord, my sons can't swim to this day, and they grown men."

"Sarah's mother felt like yourselves," I went on, enjoying my attentive audience as much as the sandwich. "It was one thing for her grown daughter to be living wild, but quite another with a little girl involved -- the mother's only granddaughter -- growing up like a weed between two Flower Children."

"The disgruntled granny often made her way up the rutted dirt road to their hilltop homestead, finding it more uncivilized with each visit. Scrawny cats and dogs littered the place, the goat had its own way in the kitchen, and Brad began to look like a wayward hermit in dire need of conversion. Sarah, too, became thin and unkempt, and little Astral was long due for a good scrubbing, not having revisited the bathtub since the morning she was born."

Jack spat into the fire: "A wild breed, altogether."

"On the couple's second anniversary, the mother presented them with a new Sunbeam toaster that left them rolling in laughter. For months this toaster shifted around the cabin, unused and forgotten, until Sarah discovered it in a heap of old car parts. Surprisingly, she blew her own gasket and confronted Brad, asking what her mother's gift was doing in the junk pile."

n

"Brad, in his unruffled manner, told her he was going to disassemble it for parts, but Sarah raved on, reminding him it was a gift from her mom, that he had no right to destroy it and, indeed, she was planning to use it. In desperation, Brad tried to convince her that the toaster's use would be the death of their self-sufficient existence. Yet Sarah couldn't understand how the simple pleasure of morning toast and honey would jeopardize their lifestyle, and stubbornly held out for this singular luxury."

"That mother is no joke," Jack interjected, contemplating this social curiosity. "I'd say she was scheming all along with that toaster."

Maura scolded her own husband: "Will you stop your opinions, or I'll send you packing for the Green Mountains! Now, Kevin, go on with your story."

"Unfortunately, the toaster would only take thin-sliced bread, and nothing Sarah baked could fit into it without crumbling or jamming the pop-up mechanism. Exasperated, she descended the mountain and purchased a loaf of thin-sliced Wonder Bread from a grocery store in Bennington.

"The resulting toast made for a taste she could no longer live without, so Sarah made her Wonder Bread runs week after week, and each time she visited the shop she would glance up at the colorful shelves until, finally, she arrived home with a special treat for Brad; a treat he had habitually devoured during his college days. A treat that left him weak-kneed at hearing the crumpling of its cellophane wrapping. A treat that would send him packing for the straight life with one bite of this delicious goody -- yes, a two-pound bag of creme-filled Oreo cookies!

"And the last time I saw that couple," I concluded, picking the last crumbs off my plate, "they were driving around my hometown in a brand-new automobile eating ice cream cones."

Jack poked the fire triumphantly with the tongs. "Bedamned, all on account of that toaster! Now, wasn't I right, Maura, about the mother's cunning connivance?"

"Right as rain," Maura conceded with a laugh. "And isn't it lovely, Jack, to hear stories from such faraway places as the Green Mountains of Vermont. Now, Kevin, are ye ready for the tea and apple tart before bed?"

"I am," I said, politely handing her my empty plate.

Kevin O'Hara writes an annual St. Patrick's Day column for The Berkshire Eagle. His latest book, "A Lucky Irish Lad," is now in bookstores.

Tweet

Share 0

 Share

TALK TO US

If you'd like to leave a comment (or a tip or a question) about this story with the editors, please email us (<mailto:news@berkshireeagle.com>). We also welcome letters to the editor for publication; you can do that by filling out our letters form (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSebsleaANReD7JSKRQ_UZaBy8p6LM0bDwZr-Alld8qg6XtY_w/viewform) and submitting it to the newsroom.
