

Finding Anna Joyce

A Short Story by Cathy Jones-Smith

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I startle when the phone rings and pulls my attention from the nightly news. Probably a telemarketer, I think as I squint at caller ID. But instantly I recognize that familiar Portland number. It pops up now just as it has hundreds of times in the past decade. It's Laura - my cousin and genealogy buddy - whom I met in 2008.

My eyes dart to the Ansonia wall clock across the room.

9:20 - quite late for this early-rising teacher to call on a school night. My pulse quickens. I'll bet she's found something. I kick down the footrest and hop from my recliner.



"And, to what do I owe this late-night call?" I tease, walking down the hall.

"Oh, thanks for picking up," my cousin whispers. Her voice quivers as though she can't quite catch her breath. For a moment I'm afraid something is terribly wrong.

"Hey, OK. So, I think I've found something," comes her familiar refrain. I'm reassured her breathlessness is just excitement.

"So, I'm looking at this tree on Ancestry," she goes on. "It's got an Anna Joyce, who married in 1902 in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. The marriage record includes the parents of the bride and groom. And, listen to this, Anna's were Patrick Joyce and Bridget Sullivan."

My diaphragm constricts around my ribcage until I hardly breathe. Trying to grasp what Cousin has told me, I move my feet to help me think. Circling the dining room table, I recall the photo from my grandma's collection - an unknown woman, photographed by "Lyon of Pittsfield," circa 1900. I walk faster to release tension.

"You've just gotta to be kidding me," I finally say, shaking my head. "Anna Joyce, in Pittsfield? I can't believe it."

"I KNOW!" Laura blurts out. "I had to call because I can't believe it either."

"How did you find this tree?" I question her.

"The tree," she explains, "belongs to a DNA match."

I steady myself on the back of a chair. My mind pulls at each thread - Anna Joyce, Pittsfield, Patrick Joyce and Bridget Sullivan, a DNA match - all woven together. I stare off into the distance at nothing. For a long time, we are silent, just taking it all in. Intuitively we know that Laura has discovered something we've long hoped to find: our great grandmother Bridget Joyce McDonough McBride's family. We hardly sleep a wink that night. I open the well-worn folder labeled, "Bridget Joyce of Patrick - baptisms 1865-1872." From her marriage record, we know that Bridget's father was named Patrick, but we have no idea about her mother. We'd already narrowed down potential parents to a few couples. Now, with this DNA connection, it seems we're down to just one: Patrick Joyce and Bridget Sullivan.

In the next few weeks, research goes into overdrive. Laura reaches out to several DNA matches, while I comb through records. Anna's 1899 passenger list provides details about connections back in County Galway and in Pittsfield. Federal census records for Anna and her husband indicate they had two children and lived just across the Massachusetts border in New Lebanon, New York.

Laura makes contact with Anna's granddaughter, who offers to help us. We exchange emails with DNA cousins, descendants of Honor Joyce, another Joyce sister who remained in Ireland.

We try to stay focused on Anna and finally locate her death record - 14 November 1929.

Anna's burial doesn't come up on Find-a-Grave, so I make calls to the small cemeteries between Pittsfield and New Lebanon. I speak with Beth at Immaculate Conception in New Lebanon. "Anna's not here," she reports after checking their records. "I'll give you Linda's number up at St. Joseph's Cemetery. I'll bet Anna's buried there."

I'm out when Linda returns my call. "I've got good news," she says, her voice brisk like a spring morning. "Not only is Anna buried here at St. Joseph's, but I've got her obituary." As soon as I get her message, I call her back.

"Give me your email address and I'll send it off in the morning," she promises.

"OK," I stall. "But I wonder... would you mind reading Anna's obituary to me?"

"Oh, sure." I close my eyes and listen carefully as Linda reads the clipping. "Anna of New Lebanon... a short illness and hospitalization..." When she gets to "surviving family," I hold my breath. "Besides her husband, she leaves a son, Francis, and a daughter, Catherine, both of this city, and one sister, Mrs. Bridget McBride of Seattle, Washington."

"Yes!" I shout into the phone, jumping up and fist bumping the air.

Hands shaking, I text Laura, who's still at school. **THEY'RE SISTERS FOR SURE! CALL ME!** Then I watch for the familiar Portland number to pop up on caller ID.