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WHEATON COLLEGE
Norton, Massachusetts

This is to certify that Bridgit Burke-Smith has fulfilled the requirements for graduation with Departmental Honors in history.

The degree of Bachelor of Arts was awarded on
May 21, 1016.

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Bridget's Iowa: The Immigrant Experience for Irish Women in the Hawkeye State, 1840-1900

BY

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A Study

Presented to the Faculty

of

Wheaton College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for

Graduation with Departmental Honors

in History

Norton, Massachusetts

May 16, 2016

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Introduction

Almost thirty-five million Americans identify themselves today as Irish, the result of the emigration of almost five million Irishmen and women from the Emerald Isle between 1820 and 1920. This statistic comes to life every year on March 17th, when cities across the nation celebrate the patron saint of Ireland, Saint Patrick. Through rivers dyed green, Guinnesses poured, and dogs dressed as leprechauns, Americans in 2016 are proud to celebrate their Irish heritage. Also throughout the country on March 17th, families bake soda bread and listen to “Danny Boy” on repeat, passing down what stories remain of their Irish ancestors to (sometimes unwilling) captive audiences of new generations of Irish-Americans.

Americans have come a long way from the intense nativism and prejudice ubiquitously displayed towards Irish Catholic immigrants in the nineteenth-century. The importance of immigration to the history of the United States need not be belabored here as the fact has already been established clearly enough among countless scholars as well as anyone who walks down the streets of America’s cities, or peeks into the kitchens of restaurants. It will suffice it to say here that the United States is a nation of immigrants. Almost everyone comes from someplace else, somewhere with less opportunity. The forty-five million Americans who claim Irish descent (representing seven percent of the nation’s population) have helped shape the United States into what it is today—they have had an integral role in our politics, businesses, agriculture, education and our culture.

There has been much written by historians on the different experiences of Irish immigrants in the United States and the results of the Irish diaspora on the character of

this nation. Many aspects of these experiences have been documented in the historiography of well-respected scholars. General studies of Irish immigration (the reasons for leaving Ireland and what they faced upon arrival in the United States) have been written. The most notable is by Kerby Miller, whose comprehensive book is vital for any understanding of the Irish-American experience, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, as well as Kevin Kenny's equally useful and more concise work, *The American Irish: A History*. Historians have also devoted time to studying the labor experiences of Irish immigrants in the United States, such as David Doyle's works on the experiences of Irish immigrants in industrial America. Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*, and David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* are each "whiteness" studies that look at the Irish ascent through the social ladder of American prejudice.¹

Historians have also studied the experiences of Irish female immigrants and their ancestors in the United States, beginning with the pioneer scholars of such a focus, Hasia Diner and Janet Nolan. Diner's *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* and Nolan's *Ourselves Alone: Women's Emigration from Ireland, 1885 to 1920* are the only two complete works entirely focusing on Irish female immigrants. This is despite countless books on the Irish male immigrant experience where women are given only a few paragraphs for the purposes of "what the women were up to." Slowly but surely, historians are joining into the conversation on the female Irish

¹ Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and exiles: Ireland and the Irish exodus to North America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History*, (New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), David Noel Doyle. "The Irish in Chicago." *Irish Historical Studies* 26 (1989): 293-303. Accessed August 5, 2015. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/30008601>, Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995) and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

immigrant experience, writing journal articles on topics such as why the situation in post-Famine Ireland caused so many women to leave even after the immediate threat of starvation was gone, or their marriage and fertility options at home and abroad, or the important positions they held in their families even after emigration through the remittances they sent home. These remittances were to support those who stayed and to finance those who wanted to leave. Scholars have also added to the labor history of the Irish immigrant experience by adding the voice of women, looking at both single and married women in domestic service and factory positions. Some studies of the experiences of domestic servants have looked at the influence of Victorian homes on “educating” the Irish women in teaching them both how to run a household and middle-class norms of gentility. Bronwen Walter continues to be the only scholar to have devoted time looking at the female Irish immigrants’ experiences of “whiteness” in the United States.²

This thesis aims to bring together Irish labor history, “whiteness” studies, the history of Irish women in the United States, as well as of pioneer women on the Midwestern frontier in the nineteenth-century together in a study of the Irish female immigrant’s experience in the United States. It uses the heavily Irish populated state of Iowa as a framework. Its purpose is to look at the experience of female Irish immigrants in Iowa and to study the importance of their labor in the larger scheme of Irish-American history. Virtually no comprehensive studies of Irish immigrants in Iowa has been done

² Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), Janet Nolan, *Ourselves Alone: Women's Emigration From Ireland, 1885-1920*, (Place: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989) and Bronwen Walter, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place, and Irish Women*, (New York: Routledge, 2001).

for over fifty years, and there has never been a study of Irish women in Iowa. Nor has there been one that looks at the labor of Irish women in Iowa. Specific studies of the Irish in other communities and states in the Midwest such as on the Kansas frontier or in Wisconsin have been done, as have studies of Irish women in places such as Philadelphia or Lowell, Massachusetts. This thesis is therefore unique in that it is the first time someone has singled out the activities and experiences of Irish women on the nineteenth-century Iowa frontier for research. It argues that the Irish women who continued their migration west to the Iowa frontier, though not freed from patriarchal assumptions and constrictions, played an active and vital role in shaping the new state and were able to regain some of the status that they had lost after the structural changes in Ireland that came with the Great Potato Famine.

The Great Potato Famine

What causes groups of people to leave their homeland never has a single answer. The worldwide dispersion of the Irish and Irish identity certainly cannot be explained by only one factor. Some historians argue that the Irish left in such massive numbers because of the poverty surrounding them. Or, because of the appeal of American opportunity they had heard so much about by way of letters from family members and friends already there. But it was undoubtedly the failure of the potato crop that ignited the mass droves of emigration responsible for more people claiming Irish descent than currently live in Ireland.

Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Ireland witnessed dramatic changes. Rapid population growth until the mid-1840s combined with the increased subdivision of land, and total reliance on the potato crop resulted in catastrophe for the majority of the

Irish population. Most middling and small farmers engaged in a partible inheritance system whereby fathers subdivided their holdings to give their sons land when they married. When farmers insisted on dividing their holdings, families had to subsist on smaller and smaller plots of land, and no one had enough land to truly prosper. The trend of early marriage among the poor agricultural population as well as lower infant mortality rates and widespread smallpox vaccination meant that the Irish population grew by an incredible seventy-five percent between 1780 and 1821.³ More people were surviving on increasingly smaller tracts of land. Land was often divided so many times that families had less than an acre to support six to ten people.⁴

By the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Irish diet mainly consisted of potatoes. The potato was easily grown even in the rocky soil of western Ireland, and it provided enough nutrients to subsist on. It was cheap to plant and easy to cultivate.⁵ The rest of Irish farmers land was used to grow cash crops and raise livestock in order to pay the rent. So when successive years of potato blights came, starvation, death, and emigration followed. Potato harvests had failed before, but failures several years in a row caught the Irish completely off guard. In 1845 the potato blight destroyed thirty to forty percent of the potato crop. Not suspecting that the blight would return, farmers continued to plant potatoes and in 1846 it came back in full force, this time destroying almost the entire crop.⁶ In 1847 the blight itself lessened slightly, but the Irish had become disheartened and had not planted many potatoes. As a result, suffering was widespread

³ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 58

⁴ Polly Radosh, "Colonial Oppression, Gender, and Women in the Irish Diaspora," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 22 (2009): 271, Accessed August 17, 2015. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-6443.2009.01350.

⁵ Radosh, "Colonial Oppression," 272

⁶ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 281.

during “Black ‘47.” There was a near total lack of available food for the Irish poor. Since the crops that had been planted in 1847 had done well, Irish farmers tried again in 1848. Once again, the infestation returned in full force. The disease continued to affect the potatoes in 1849 and throughout the early 1850s potato harvests would stay at less than 50 percent of their 1844 levels.⁷

Total Irish reliance on one crop for subsistence led to a million deaths and the flight of 1.8 million people to America in just ten years. Miller argues that while Irish emigration had been increasing steadily in the decades leading up to the famine, it is unlikely more than a third of that number would have left Ireland between 1845 and 1855 if not for the potato blight.⁸ Millions of middling and small farmers were starving and were not able to eat their cash crops or livestock because if they sold their crops they would not be able to pay rent on their land. Without money, they could not buy other food.⁹ Between 1846 and 1855, it is estimated that half a million or more Irish were evicted from their homes as landlords ruthlessly used the opportunity to consolidate land into larger and larger holdings for their own benefit.¹⁰ It is hardly surprising that over 2.1 million Irish would see flight overseas as their best, indeed only, option for survival.¹¹

⁷ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 282

⁸ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 280

⁹ Robert E. Kennedy Jr., *The Irish: Emigration, Marriage and Fertility*, (Place: University of California Press, 1973).

¹⁰ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 287

¹¹ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 291

Bridget's Iowa

This thesis expands on the standard Famine narrative throughout the course of three chapters. The first chapter looks at the history of the Irish in Iowa between 1840 and 1900. After looking at some of the causes of Irish women leaving Ireland during the wave of post-famine emigration in which women at times outnumbered men traveling to the New World, it describes what pulled both male and female Irish immigrants to the new state, including opportunities for labor, cheap land, and the chance to marry someone of Irish parentage (an opportunity which had become significantly less likely in post-famine Ireland). This chapter serves as context and to set the scene for the remainder of the thesis by drawing on letters, newspaper articles, census reports, interviews and family histories to describe the prevalence of Irish communities in Iowa as well as the experiences of the women who helped create them. This chapter argues that Irish women found ways to assert their independence and agency in forms that post-Famine Ireland no longer allowed, and that were possible only on the frontier of nineteenth-century Iowa.

The second chapter focuses on the labor, both paid and unpaid, of Irish women in Iowa between 1840 and 1900. The type of work immigrant women chose often depended heavily on their individual circumstances as either single women or members of a family. This chapter looks at the significance of the abundance of paid domestic service jobs available for single Irish women to take advantage of, describing how the stereotype of the Irish “Bridget” played out in the Midwest and the role of domestic service for many women as a “stop gap” before marriage and as a job to provide them with the skills needed for married life. This section also looks at the unpaid domestic duties of Irish farmwives in Iowa and how their activities contributed to their household economies. The

chapter argues one of the main points of the thesis, that while emigration might have allowed Irish women to gain economic dependence initially as so many came over as single women, and to regain some level of economic equality with their husbands upon marriage (to an extent impossible in post-famine Ireland), emigration was not an escape from traditional domestic duties. Thus, new labor opportunities in America did not entirely free them from old patriarchal ideas about a woman's duty. This chapter relies heavily on nineteenth-century newspapers that give insight into the types of opportunities available for single women as well as family histories, obituaries, and biographical histories of various counties in Iowa which, while focusing on the respectable Irish men of the town, sometimes give insight into the experiences of their wives in the second half of the nineteenth-century. It also utilizes an 1881 advice book, Harriet Spofford's *The Servant Girl Question*. This work gives invaluable insight into the daily activities and responsibilities of domestic servants and the stereotypes held by American Protestants towards them.¹²

The third chapter looks at the history of "how the Irish became white," based off the monograph of that title, by Noel Ignatiev. This section contributes to the anemic body of literature on the participation and influence of Irish women in the process of the Irish ethnic cohort's "becoming white." This chapter argues that Irish women in nineteenth-century Iowa were conscious of the low status of their ethnic group and that their activities and decisions helped Irish immigrants to improve the position of the Irish race in the United States. This chapter seeks to persuade readers that the roles of Irish women in Iowa should be considered in discussions of Irish whiteness. This is done by looking at

¹² Harriet Prescott Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1881).

stereotypes of the Irish, examining American fears towards Irish immigrants, exploring even further their involvement in domestic service, and looking at the ways in which Irish immigrants and their offspring in Iowa improved their group status by climbing the rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.

Although little has been written on Irish female immigrants in Iowa and even less has been written on the whiteness process in Iowa, the nineteenth-century heartland is a rich source for such studies. Iowa, between 1840 and 1900, was a newly established state and in need of settling. Iowa allowed Irish female immigrants to regain many of the opportunities that the changed social landscape of post-famine Ireland had taken away from them. They could work as domestic servants, they could marry, and though they did not receive fair recognition, women's labor on family farms was still recognized as valuable. At the same time, however, immigration to Iowa did not allow them to completely escape from some of the traditional duties and expectations expected of all women at this time. Iowa is also a valuable landscape for what it has to tell us about the process of the Irish rising to the ranks of the middle class. Newspaper articles and biographical records make it clear that Irish women involved in domestic service in Iowa understood the degraded nature of their work, and they and their daughters moved away from it as the century progressed.

Chapter One: “I would rather live in Ireland if I could live as well.”

Letter from Alex Aitken, Rapid Creek, Iowa, to Wm. (William) Patterson, Five Mile Town, County Tyrone, Ireland January 1866

The Great Famine completely changed the social landscape of Ireland. Most historians agree that it dramatically weakened the status of women in Irish society. Prior to the famine, women had been vital members of the economy and contributors to household income, and as such had a considerable amount of independence. Growing factory competition abroad was changing this even before the potato blight, but as of 1841 women still accounted for over half of the total non-agricultural labor force and played a vital role in helping on the farm.¹³ The income of women in pre-famine Ireland allowed single Irish women the opportunity to be financially independent. Earning an independent income also increased a woman’s status as a family member by substantially contributing towards the finances of her family if they were at the subsistence level, or allowed the working Irish woman the pleasure of some luxuries if her family was in adequate economic condition.¹⁴

Wives as well as single women held important positions of authority within the economics of the family in pre-famine Ireland. Cash was rare, but what money was available was controlled by women and delegated to the needs they determined were greatest. Men certainly held the role of the patriarchal male authority, but it was much laxer in pre-Famine Ireland than in other contemporary European countries. Irish men

¹³ J.J. Lee, “Women and the Church Since the Famine,” in *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension*, ed. Margaret MacCurtain and Donncha O’Corrain (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), 37.

¹⁴ William Phalen, “The Stalwart Ladies: Nineteenth Century Female Irish Emigrants to the United States,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 92 (2003):183. Accessed July 25, 2015, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/30095612>.

were only the “official” heads of household, with women as the “real” heads of the house.”¹⁵ Women found ways to make it appear as if the men were in charge, when in reality they ran the household and made important decisions about money, inheritance, and immigration.¹⁶

Irish Studies historian J.J. Lee, in his article “Women and the Church Since the Famine” finds three ways that the Potato Famine changed the economic contributions and importance of women. First, domestic industry, the primary source of independent income for women, fell by 75% between 1841 and 1851. Second, the Famine witnessed a drastic shift from tillage to livestock, which meant that agriculture needed less labor and women became less necessary as workers on the family farm. Third, Lee argues that there was a shift in the balance of economic power within the family because land consolidation meant fewer small farming families, and women held a greater position of economic importance in families who worked small farms than in families who worked large farms. Thus overall, women's importance in society declined in favor of men's as there were significantly fewer family structures of the type that considered women vital contributing members on the family farm.¹⁷

The decline of women's economic importance meant that socially Irish women's lives changed drastically. Prior to the Great Famine, Irish women married early because there were few economic barriers, especially as long as newlyweds were receiving land upon marriage under the partible inheritance system. But as this system changed and land

¹⁵ Polly Radosh, “Colonial Oppression, Gender, and Women in the Irish Diaspora,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 22 (2009): 273, accessed August 17, 2015, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6443.2009.01350. Radosh, argues that in pre-Famine Ireland “familial patriarchy prevailed and colonial oppression limited options for all members of the society, but women were empowered within the family structure to influence decisions and exercise economic power.”

¹⁶ Radosh, “Colonial Oppression,” 274-275.

¹⁷ Lee, “Women and the Church since the Famine,” 37.

became more and more scarce, arranged marriages and the practice of dowries became widespread.¹⁸ Wives were not able to make as much of an economic contribution to the household as they had done before the famine (with wages from domestic industry and help with agricultural labor), and so the capital they brought into the marriage became more valued. Thus, the dowry became increasingly important, or what Irish historian David Fitzpatrick terms the “fine for the transfer of a redundant female from one family to another.”¹⁹ The majority of Irish women could not earn more than subsistence-level money to save up for a dowry without the wage opportunities of domestic manufacturing, and even if they somehow managed to come up with a sufficient dowry they had trouble marrying a man of their own social standing because he too was likely to be in economic trouble.²⁰

Not only was the chance to marry someone of their own choosing rapidly disappearing, but the opportunity for Irish women to get married at all and to set up a household without parental support was fading as well. As inheritance changed from a partible to impartible system, the male head of household became more able to control the timing and choice of marriage partner for his inheriting son, usually with an eye towards consolidating nearby land.²¹ This complete structural change for marriage meant

¹⁸ Pauline Jackson, “Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration,” *International Migration Review* 18 (1984): 1009, accessed August 16, 2015, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/2546070>.

¹⁹ David Fitzpatrick, “The Modernisation of the Irish Female,” in *Rural Ireland 1600-1900: Modernisation and Change*, ed. Patrick O’Flanagan (Cork: Cork University Press, 1987), 169.

²⁰ Phalen, “The Stalwart Ladies,” 184.

²¹ Jackson, “Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration,” 1010. Jackson argues that this was a sign of the spread of patriarchal relations in post-Famine Ireland as the head of the house gained more power socially and economically over his family.

that the rate of marriage dropped, the age gap between those who did marry increased, and permanent celibacy rates skyrocketed.²²

Even for those women who stayed and found a marriage partner, female activities in post-Famine Ireland were of a decidedly different character now that women were not able to bring extra income into the family coffers. Fitzpatrick argues that as the daughters and wives of farmers retreated from the process of production after the Famine, housekeeping became a more important and respectable task. He writes that “in occupation as in education, the growing refinement of the female was a manifestation of diminished utility rather than raised status.”²³ In place of being contributors to family income and members of production, post-Famine women were expected to spend their time in the home. The main focus of the Irish table, the potato, had not required many culinary skills, but this would change in the post-Famine years. The introduction of stoves and ranges for straining liquids, as well as a greater variety in the Irish diet due to a fear of reliance on one crop, meant women spent much more time in the kitchen than they had before the Famine.²⁴

In addition to increased importance on women’s work in the home, the Irish woman also experienced a change in her social status as reflected by her own family members. Especially after the famine, when women were no longer producers in the economic sense, their role as reproducers became even more important. Children were economic assets who served a social insurance role by being potential emigrants who

²²Jackson, “Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration,” 1012. Jackson also sees the older age of the groom compared to his wife as a sign of the spread of patriarchal relations in post-Famine Ireland, as the man’s older age “conferred more power and status on him than hitherto and further contributed to the patriarchal character of post-famine marriage.”

²³ Fitzpatrick, “The Modernisation of the Irish Female,” 167.

²⁴ Lee, “Women and the Church since the Famine,” 37-38.

could send remittances back to Ireland to “provide parental pensions and the means for further emigration.”²⁵ After a wife had completed her potential childbearing and childrearing years, her role became that of servant, both to sons and her husband. After the famine, Irish wives were consistently reminded of their inferior social status. For example, they were expected to wait on men to finish dining before eating what scraps were left behind during mealtime. This practice derived from men being deemed the breadwinners of the household, who had to eat enough to gain strength for farm work, whereas it was not seen to be as important that women kept strong and well-fed. After the famine some Irish women even had to walk steps behind their husbands in public spaces, another reflection of their subordinate position.²⁶ Post-Famine Ireland was a country remarkably different from the one earlier in the century, which had held mothers in positions of respect and fathers as figureheads. It is no wonder then that social changes of such immense importance in women's lives would be “push” factors in many Irish women’s decisions to emigrate.

Push and Pull Factors for Irish Women’s Participation in the Irish Diaspora

Historians of immigration categorize immigrants’ reasons for leaving into “push” and “pull factors,” describing what situations in their native countries “push” immigrants to leave, and the different attractions of the new country which combine to “pull” immigrants abroad. This section analyzes what exactly those push and pull factors were for Irish immigrant women coming to the United States in the nineteenth-century.

²⁵ Fitzpatrick, “The Modernisation of the Irish Female,” 170.

²⁶ Fitzpatrick, “The Modernisation of the Irish Female,” 171.

As family members and friends died of disease and hunger during the potato blight, tens of thousands of Irish men and women thronged to the ports to make their way across the Atlantic in the worst of the Famine years, taking “coffin ships,” overcrowded and full of disease, in their desperation to escape the gnawing hunger.²⁷ Some landlords began organizing to pay the passages of their tenants to go overseas or subsidize the fares, thus “solving” the problem of tenants who could not pay their rents by shuffling the problem off on cities like New York City and Boston.²⁸ Kerby Miller distinguishes between emigrants’ reasons for leaving, arguing that there were significant differences between those who left because they calculated their chances for success were better abroad, and “demoralized refugees who felt they had no alternative.”²⁹ In other words, there were sharp differences between those who left to avoid pauperization and looked for success in the abundant opportunities of the New World, and those who left because of starvation—whose choices had been narrowed to leaving Ireland or dying. Most emigrants during and immediately following the potato Famine, however, merely wanted a chance to survive.

The causes and characteristics of post-Famine emigration are much harder to untangle. Miller found that between “...1856-1921 Ireland lost between 4.1 and 4.5 million inhabitants, of whom perhaps 3.5 million ended their travels in North America, primarily in the United States,” and that “by 1900, more Irishmen and women (including second-generation Irish-Americans) were living in the United States alone than in Ireland

²⁷ Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 292.

²⁸ Jackson, “Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration,” 1005.

²⁹ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 294.

itself.”³⁰ Why did such high numbers of people continue to leave even after the situation in Ireland had improved? Why, indeed, was it during *post*-Famine emigration that we see higher percentages of *female* Irish emigrants? Before 1845 two-thirds of Irish arriving in New York were men, but between 1851 and 1910 the sex ratio for emigrants was roughly equal. Women would never be less than forty-five percent of emigrating Irish in the post-Famine decades, and they were a majority after 1880, as can be seen in Table 1. This is a uniquely Irish characteristic of emigration because men predominated among emigrants coming from Southern and Eastern Europe to the United States during the same period.³¹

Table 1³²
Proportion of Females Among Emigrants From 26 Counties of Ireland: 1852-1921

Period	% Female
1852-1860	49.8
1861-1870	45.6
1871-1880	47.1
1881-1890	49.4
1891-1900	54.1
1901-1910	52.2
1911-1921	52.6
1852-1921	50.1

In what is perhaps the most comprehensive and important book on Irish female emigrants, Janet Nolan, in her book *Ourselves Alone: Women’s Emigration From Ireland, 1885-1920*, looks at why the proportions of female emigrants among the Irish were so high. Her explanation for the great and sustained migration of single women from Ireland deserves to be quoted in full:

³⁰ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 346.

³¹ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 352-353.

³² Located in Jackson, “Women in 19th Century Irish Immigration,” 1007. Source: Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems. Reports. 1954. Derived from Table 28. p. 318.

The women who left Ireland during this period did so because they had grown ever more superfluous in their home communities as new demographic and economic patterns transformed Irish life in the half-century before 1880. These changes had lessened these women's chances for becoming wives and thereby attaining adult social and economic status. Since no corresponding expansion of new biological, economic, or social opportunities for unmarried women had taken place, the position of women deteriorated despite a rise in overall economic prosperity. Rather than accept their newly marginal lives as celibate dependents on family farms, however, more and more women left Ireland. By the 1880s their emigration reached epidemic-like proportions, especially in the west and the southwest, the regions undergoing the most abrupt changes in population and economic organization. In view of Irish women's increasingly restricted lives, their decision to emigrate becomes a remarkable example of female self-determination.³³

What exactly spurred all these women, years after there was a danger of starving to death, to see emigration as the best, indeed only, option to avoid becoming superfluous members of a transformed Ireland? Irish women were increasingly marginal in post-Famine Irish society. Before 1830 early and universal marriage and diffuse female employment "assured women an integrated adult role as wives and co-breadwinners within the family economy."³⁴ But after 1830 fewer and fewer marriages took place, opportunities for female wage labor declined steeply and thus the status of unmarried women deteriorated. By 1880 more and more women were redundant single dependents living on their father's or brother's farms, with little hope of marrying or of earning wages that would allow them to live independently and set up their own households.³⁵

Increased contact with the outside world as methods of communication and transatlantic exchange became more widespread created new attitudes and aspirations that conflicted with Irish rural values. This meant that in post-Famine Ireland, the increasing numbers of dependent single women were becoming "less and less content

³³ Janet Nolan, *Ourselves Alone: Women's Emigration from Ireland, 1885-1920* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 2-3.

³⁴ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 26.

³⁵ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 26.

with the discrepancy between their rising expectations and their dependent positions on family farms.”³⁶ Irish women were becoming aware of a gap between their lives in Ireland and the opportunities available in the outside world. Emigration was not only a chance to escape from dire economic and patriarchal conditions in Ireland, but also “a route to an independent adult status...”³⁷ Such social and demographic changes were significant motivating factors in Irish women’s decisions to emigrate. Ireland no longer had a place for all of the women who wanted to marry or earn an independent income, nor could it accommodate their growing expectations for life, so many Irish women chose to make new lives abroad.³⁸ Nolan also makes it clear that this mass migration of women from Ireland should not be seen as a “passive retreat of superfluous females from inhospitable circumstances.” She argues that a deep investigation of their emigration reveals women who “actively chose to abandon diminished lives at home and to embrace adventure abroad while seeking jobs, husbands, and an independent adult status.”³⁹

An important characteristic of post-Famine immigrants was their tendency to be young. In the post-famine emigration period the numbers of child emigrants under the age of 14 fell, while at the same time young women between 15 and 19 years old doubled in numbers. Jackson argues that this suggests that emigrating families and households were being replaced by young single people, including female teenagers, and persons traveling alone, not with families or spouses.⁴⁰ Thus, a majority of overall emigrants from Ireland were not only female, but they were young single women. These emigrants

³⁶ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 37.

³⁷ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 37-43.

³⁸ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 8, 52.

³⁹ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 73.

⁴⁰ Jackson, “Women in 19th Century Irish Emigration,” 1006.

used remittances sent from America to pay their passages and came to America and other countries abroad with very little capital and few marketable skills. They were ready to try out a life which held out a promise of more choices and options than Ireland could offer.⁴¹

Other external factors influenced the decisions of both genders to continue to emigrate even after the immediate threat of starvation had passed. These included the persistence of advertisements by railroad and land companies with a vested interest in emigration, the relative cheapness and ease of the actual journey overseas (as compared to squalid conditions during famine emigration), and reports of the abundance of domestic service jobs for women.⁴² Those who still had trouble paying their passage fares were assisted by Irish Poor Law boards who continued financing the emigration of Irish paupers into 1906, as well as the help of remittances from established Irish-American communities in the states. Astoundingly, between 1848 and 1900, \$260 million was sent home to Ireland, forty percent in the form of prepaid tickets to America.⁴³

Many Irishmen and women were convinced to go abroad because of letters they received from family members and friends who had already settled in the United States. In 1849, William and Robert Mann, of Washington County, Iowa, wrote their friend Joseph Brown in County Down, Ireland. William and Robert wrote about how sorry they were about the “ills that has befelen the land [of] our nativity” and urged Joseph to come to the United States and travel west to Iowa. The two told him that if he came to Iowa he could be very satisfied in the land that was available for six dollars an acre. William and

⁴¹ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 352-353.

⁴² Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 353.

⁴³ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 357.

Robert also wrote that there was much improved land to be had and unimproved land for an even cheaper price, covered “with the best pasture from 8 to 36 inches long.”⁴⁴ They told their friend that if he was not able to buy the land upon his arrival, he could work on it and improve it until he was able to pay for it in full without a rent or tax. Especially appealing to a countryman who had just lived through the Great Potato Famine was the fact that a man could get three bushels of corn for a day’s work, or one and a half bushels of wheat. The Manns closed by telling Brown that William had 160 acres of land, 70 of which was in cultivation, which included “houses and a fare sock [a ploughshare] [of] cows hoggs and etc,” and that Robert had “60 acers [of] land 2 horses and a good sock.” Such a letter would have had a significant effect on someone like Joseph Brown in Ireland during the midst of the Famine. If his friends in Iowa were entreating him to come overseas as soon as he could, Joseph was probably not a very well-off Irish farmer, so for him to hear of the abundance of land available in the Midwestern United States and the relative cheapness of food must have had a powerfully persuasive impact.

Not all the letters sent home painted such a picture of abundance. Some described hardships, but with language that spoke of the practical necessity of a new life abroad. A letter from Alex Aitken, from Rapid Creek, Iowa, to Wm. (William) Patterson of Five Mile Town, County Tyrone, Ireland in January 1866 described how Aitken stayed in Canada for only one day because he did not like the appearance of the country and land was too dear. He described how after some difficulty he was able to buy 80 acres of land

⁴⁴ Letter from William and Robert Mann, Washington County, Iowa to Joseph Brown, Saintfield, Ireland. 19 July 1849. Mann’s exact words were: “suit your salva in land ove any...either with improvements or not improvements can be got fur six dollars an acer and ther is any quantity ov an improved land which can be had fur one dollar and 25 cents per acer there is thousands ove acers ove this last sort here covrd with the best pasture from 8 to 36 inches long... he can go on and improve on it till he is able to pay fur it ith out any rant or tax and a man can got 3 bushels ove corn fur a days work or one bushel and one half ove wheat.” Located at State Historical Society Research Center in Iowa City.

in Rapid Creek, Iowa for nine dollars an acre. He told Patterson his land had “plenty of timber on it, I could sell the timber any day for more than the whole farm cost me,” and he had bought it with the intention of selling again as he immediately saw he could double his money. He said “I have made up my mind not to sell till I hear from you or if Mr. Montgomery gives me a situation worth coming for I will sell out and return to 5 mile town although I like this country very well for it is a money making place, yet withal I would rather live in Ireland if I could live as well...”. Aitken told his friend that the land here required no enrichment or fertilizer— “it will grow potatoes of the best quality without manure, there is no disease here...it grows sugar cane...and wheat of the best quality in succession for twenty years without much trouble.”⁴⁵ Iowa’s soil was excellent for growing grain and other crops, in addition to raising animals.⁴⁶ Such a letter is a perfect example of rational logic and the quest for survival trumping an emotional attachment to a home country to which most Irish emigrants realized they would never return. This would be Ireland’s loss, but Iowa’s and America’s gain.

The tens of thousands of dispossessed Irishwomen who looked abroad for opportunities to marry, earn an independent income, and have a better future had a unique story before they even landed in America. Most women in male-dominated societies did not have the escape option offered to Irish women “that offered them comparative autonomy, if nothing like equality...” of emigration.⁴⁷ As mentioned earlier, unlike other European immigrant waves, Irish women equaled in numbers the Irish men arriving in

⁴⁵ Letter from Alex Aitken, Rapid Creek near Iowa City, Iowa to Wm. Patterson, Five Mile Town, County Tyrone. January 14, 1866. Located at State Historical Society Research Center, Iowa City.

⁴⁶ Herr, *Critical Regionalism*, 34.

⁴⁷ Timothy W. Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish: Households, Migration, and the Rural Economy in Ireland, 1850-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 32.

America, and at some points, were even more numerous. The sex ratios of Jewish immigrants were similar to those of the Irish, but most Jewish women were married when they emigrated. Only about forty percent of German immigrants were female, and an even smaller twenty percent of southern Italians. Italian women were still restricted from even appearing in public without a chaperone, and so they rarely traveled across the Atlantic alone.⁴⁸ In contrast, most of the female Irish immigrants were unmarried and traveled alone, seeking fortunes abroad independent of support of a father, husband, or brother. These women were pushed abroad by a constricting situation in post-Famine Ireland, one which saw their roles and utility as members of Irish society diminished. And they were pulled abroad by letters and advertisements and the promise of a land in which they could be more than superfluous members of society again.

Why Iowa?

(‘Iowa’-she keened from behind a drystone wall-
‘Iowa- I don’t want to have to go to Iowa.
Iowa doesn’t want me and I don’t want Iowa.
Why must I forsake Ireland for Iowa?’)⁴⁹

“Loosestrife in Ballyferriter: to Brian Friel on His Sixtieth Birthday” by Paul Durcan

And so, hundreds of thousands of Irish emigrants would land on the shores of America. Many who emigrated during the Famine arrived in America were dressed in rags, suffering from malnutrition and diseases such as tuberculosis, and penniless beyond their passage money.⁵⁰ Most men and women identified themselves as either laborers or

⁴⁸ Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 139.

⁴⁹ Paul Durcan, “Loosestrife in Ballyferriter: to Brian Friel on His Sixtieth Birthday,” in *Snail in My Prime*, Paul Durcan (London: Random House, 2011).

⁵⁰ Kenny, *The American Irish*, 99-100.

servants, an indication of the type of work they expected to find in America more than a sign of the actual occupation they were familiar with, for most victims of the Famine had been farmers.⁵¹ Famine migration would transform American as well as Irish history.⁵² The post-Famine wave of emigration from Ireland was the largest from that country, accounting for sixty percent of Irish emigration to the United States since 1820. This section explores how Irish emigrants contributed to populating the Hawkeye state, looking at both female and male Irish emigrants' decisions to continue their journeys west to the frontier state of Iowa, including the availability of land that needed to be settled and labor opportunities.

Upon arrival in America, the bulk of Irish emigrants settled in Eastern cities such as Boston and New York City. This was in part due to the Irish communities already established by their predecessors and the kinship connections that awaited them there. It also seems likely that both Famine and post-Famine emigrants were hesitant to settle in the countryside in America after witnessing the starvation and eviction that had marked rural life for them in Ireland. Equally significant, most Irish immigrants simply did not arrive in the United States with the resources to continue their travels west. So, they settled in Eastern seaport cities, and wherever they landed, they began to look for work immediately.

Despite this, a significant number of Irish men and women would end up in Iowa. By 1880, 44,061 of them had made their way to the heart of the heartland.⁵³ The settling and populating of the Iowa frontier was greatly influenced by immigrants. In addition to

⁵¹ Passenger lists of Irish immigrants arriving in New York, located at State Historical Society Research Center, Iowa City.

⁵² Kenny, *The American Irish*, 99-100.

⁵³ 1880 United States Census

the Irish, by the closing of the frontier there were 88,268 German-born men and women residing in Iowa. 44,061 Irish-born people living in Iowa is a significant proportion of immigrants from Ireland. Reading the Irish experience against the background of Iowa provides a unique perspective ignored by most Irish-American researchers, who prefer to study places with a higher concentration of Irish, such as New York and Boston. There are an estimated 34.7 million Irish Americans residing in the United States today—11.2 percent of the total U.S. population.⁵⁴ The percentage of Irish Americans in Iowa today, however, exceeds the national average—13.6%, outranked only by Germans. This makes a study of the Irish in Iowa significant for what it has to tell us about the promises the sons and daughters of Erin believed Iowa held for them. Iowa historian William J. Peterson, in his study *The Story of Iowa: The Progress of An American State*, argues that men and women from the “Emerald Isle were attracted by the rich soil and limitless freedom of Iowa.” After being driven from their home by the oppressive British and the potato famine, they found in Iowa freedom and abundance.⁵⁵ Many were perhaps attracted by the promises of the Board of Immigration, which wrote in 1870 that “the husbandman has reason for his faith in Iowa, when she so rarely fails to reward him generously for the labor bestowed in the cultivation of the soil. Always true to the

⁵⁴ “Irish-American Heritage Month,” last modified January 24, 2012, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/pdf/cb12ff-03_irishamer.pdf and “Number of Irish-Americans Seven Times Larger Than Entire Population of Ireland,” last modified January 17, 2016, <http://www.irishcentral.com/news/-census-shows-almost-seven-times-more-irish-americans-than-population-of-ireland-218344001-237779801.html>

⁵⁵ William John Peterson, *The Story of Iowa: The Progress of an American State* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1952), 930.

confidence reposed in her, she has never failed at the return of the harvest to give her people bread.”⁵⁶

Iowa and Ireland share much in common. One need only to drive down long highways past rolling hills of green to understand why Irish immigrants might have found settling in Iowa a comforting reminder of the Ireland to which they most likely would never return. In an 1848 letter describing Iowa, James McKee wrote that “Sir where you to get a sight of this country it would be next to a visit back to the Emerald Isle.”⁵⁷ Cheryl Herr, who has written a number of cultural studies regarding Ireland, finds in her work *Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: From Ireland to the American Midwest* several other comparisons that verify the value of a study of the Irish in Iowa. To begin with, both places shared a history of migration and agrarian values. Both countries also have been emblematic of the problems of rural life: “perpetually stereotyped, routinely exploited, subject to persistent population loss and faced with symmetrical environmental threats.”⁵⁸ Famine victims who left Ireland and migrated to rural America “said farewell to a society both negligently and iniquitously destroyed, and they remade themselves on an outrageously fertile soil pliant to a newly evolving regional identity.”⁵⁹ The terrain, argues Herr, had to feel like rural Ireland to attract Irish settlers, and that it did.⁶⁰ Iowa’s Irish population would rise from 4,885 in 1850 to 28,072 in 1860, a remarkable jump for

⁵⁶ Iowa Board of Immigration, “Iowa: The Home for Immigrants: Being a Treatise on the Resources of Iowa, and Giving Useful Information With Regard to the State, for the Benefit of Immigrants and Others,” (Des Moines: Mills & Co., Printers and Publishers, 1870), 28.

⁵⁷ Letter from James McKee to John Donnan, July 28, 1848, located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/letters.htm>

⁵⁸ Cheryl Herr, *Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: From Ireland to the American Midwest*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 27.

⁵⁹ Herr, *Critical Regionalism*, 28-29.

⁶⁰ Herr, *Critical Regionalism*, 30.

just a ten year time span.⁶¹ Those Irish “hard-core agrarians in love with or otherwise fated to land” played a remarkable part in the settling of Iowa, and contributed to the enduring similarities between the two distant places even today.

In an analysis of Paul Durcan’s 1988 poem, “Loosestrife in Ballyferriter: to Brian Friel on his sixtieth birthday,” quoted above, Herr argues that the poem reminds us that economically forced emigration was not easy. “Iowa stands not only as the sound of keening,” she writes, “but also as a sort of nightmare imaginary, a negative space to Ireland’s solid, drystone reality and classical culture.”⁶² The Iowa the Irish settled on from the 1830s to the closing of the frontier in 1870 was wild and in need of taming. When pioneers began arriving in Iowa in the 1830s, prairie grass covered 75 to 85 percent of the state. What might have originally seemed like pleasant rolling hills of green grass would turn out to be psychological and physical challenges for the immigrants. Vast swathes of land in the north were swamps that needed to be drained (a typical job on the rain-drenched farms of Ireland where laborers attempted to make land drier by setting up systems for excess water to flow away) before they could even be farmed. An Irish clergyman recently arrived in Iowa saw “one vast waving sheet of green” in the Iowa prairie, but later learned that it was growing “only to be devoured by fire in the fall,” the flames “rolling and roaring for miles.”⁶³ Winters were frigid, and full-fledged blizzards were new to Irish used to the more mild temperatures of the Atlantic Ocean. But the soil and the land available were a gift for Irish farmers whose memories of hunger were still painfully recent. One Irish immigrant wrote home from Iowa that

⁶¹ Mark Wyman, *Immigrants in the Valley: Irish, Germans, and Americans in the Upper Mississippi Country, 1830-1860* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984), 44.

⁶² Herr, *Critical Regionalism*, 50.

⁶³ Wyman, *Immigrants in the Valley*, 2.

“there is no grubbing through roots, or hopping round stumps when ploughing here.”⁶⁴

Iowa had what the Irish men and women so desperately needed and hoped for when they got on those ships and crossed the Atlantic Ocean: opportunities for labor and cheap land.

People were needed to mine, farm, and build railroads in frontier Iowa, and so “Iowa had an interest in every emigrant ship which left the shores of Ireland.”⁶⁵ There were several different ways Irish immigrants ended up in Iowa. The letter from William and Robert Mann to Joseph Brown urging him to come to Iowa also detailed the best route to come by:

You wanted to know the best route to take...to this country in the first place try to get a passage in an american vassel as the are the fastest sailing vasesles and the most accomodating seemen 2 try to get a passage to Phildalfe then tak the rail roads fur Pitsburg if you can not go to Phildalphia either Baltimore or New York will doo then to Philadelphi and then by Pitsburg then over the Ohio river to the mouth ove the Mississipai river thens to St Luis thens to Burlington in Iowa whan you cum to Pitsburg try to get a bote that will go all the way to St Luies as boets is troublesome on these rivers.⁶⁶

There were other ways to get to Iowa straight from Ireland as well, such as via New Orleans, but the Manns did not recommend this route, writing in their letter that passage by route of New Orleans was “not the best ways and it is far from being as healthy and as agreeable.”⁶⁷

Most Irish worked on the East Coast for a few years, marrying and then traveling to the Midwest to buy a farm and start a family. The lure of cheap and abundant land was

⁶⁴ Wyman, *Immigrants in the Valley*, 4.

⁶⁵ Homer L. Calkin, “The Irish in Iowa,” (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1964), 43.

⁶⁶ Letter from William and Robert Mann, Washington County, Iowa to Joseph Brown, Saintfield, Ireland. 19 July 1849.

⁶⁷ Letter from William and Robert Mann, Washington County, Iowa to Joseph Brown, Saintfield, Ireland. 19 July 1849.

simply too irresistible for some. During the 1840s Bishop Loras of Dubuque, Iowa, wrote several letters to the Boston *Pilot* recommending that Irish migrants migrate westward to Iowa. The newspaper suggested unemployed Irish in Boston and other Eastern cities should “walk a day and work a day, until they find a home” on the frontier.⁶⁸ The letters from the Bishop in the *Pilot* also told readers that even as paupers newcomers would stand a better chance in the interior of the country, with “the sure promises of competence, comfort, and ultimate opulence” offered by the agricultural resources of the heartland.⁶⁹ This advice was heeded by men such as John Carey of County Clare, Ireland, who came to America in 1848, originally settling in New York but in 1855 continuing west to settle in Cedar County, Iowa, because he believed conditions for advancement were more favorable in the west (Carey would later purchase a farm in Crawford County on which he would reside with his wife and eight children until his death in 1889).⁷⁰

Iowa needed laborers to develop transportation and agriculture, and the westward migration of those who were struggling to make ends meet in the Eastern cities seemed like the perfect solution. Mark Wyman, a historian of immigration and the American Midwest, wrote about these push factors which encouraged Irish immigrants to continue their journey west in his book *Immigrants in the Valley: Irish, Germans, and Americans in the Upper Mississippi Country, 1830-1860*. Wyman argues that the “Eden” of the Midwestern heartland was thrown open to these immigrants because of a combination of a westward settlement push and technological innovations “that together brought the

⁶⁸ Herr, *Critical Regionalism*, 34.

⁶⁹ Calkin, “The Irish in Iowa, 47.

⁷⁰ F.W. Meyers, “Carey,” in *History of Crawford County, Iowa* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1911), located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/clarebios.htm>.

steamboat charging up western waters, wagons rolling through traces and roads, and ultimately the railroad winding into the Old Northwest.”⁷¹

Irish immigrants came to the United States in the midst of the “Age of Internal Improvements.” Beginning in the 1820s, this was a time of surging construction in the nation's infrastructure—its railroads, bridges, canals and harbors.⁷² These internal improvements required a surplus of people willing to be on the move. The largest expansion of settled ground happened between 1860 and 1880, mostly as a result of the arrival of railroads.⁷³ Iowa's first railroad lines began in the early 1850s, with promoters extending the Illinois routes westward. Construction in 1853 began a line that would stretch from the Mississippi at Rock Island to Iowa City to Council Bluffs on the western border.⁷⁴ Vast amounts of labor were needed for such enterprises, and so calls for foreign laborers were sent out. Irish newspapers reported that 10,000 laborers were needed, for wages of a dollar a day. Wyman says the Irish were assured that while the work was difficult, it was “not much harder than that of draining.”⁷⁵ But railroad and canal work were not ideal, and one Irish immigrant called those who worked on railroads and canals (whom he would be joining to escape poverty) “amongst the wicked, ignorant, profligate dregs of society.”⁷⁶

When their labor on the canals and railroads was no longer needed, many Irish men such as John O'Connor used the money they had earned to buy a farm. O'Connor was born in County Clare, Ireland, and emigrated with his wife and several children in

⁷¹ Wyman, *Immigrants in the Valley*, 4-5.

⁷² Wyman, *Immigrants in the Valley*, 75.

⁷³ Michael P. Conzen. “Local Migration Systems in Nineteenth-Century Iowa,” *Geographical Review* 64 (1974): 343, accessed July 25, 2015, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/213557>.

⁷⁴ Wyman, *Immigrants in the Valley*, 87-88.

⁷⁵ Wyman, *Immigrants in the Valley*, 88-90.

⁷⁶ Wyman, *Immigrants in the Valley*, 102.

1864. He first settled in New York but by 1867 had moved on to Iowa, where he worked as a farm laborer for a year before working on the Des Moines and Fort Dodge railroad for two years. By 1870 he had accumulated enough savings to start a farm in Greene County, where he would make his home. By 1887 he was the owner of two hundred acres.⁷⁷ Land was widely available and cheap. The soil of Iowa is some of the best in the world, and conditions are ideal for agriculture, especially growing corn. Iowa has been found to contain 26,000,000 acres of Grade I land (“best and most versatile”), which is a remarkable one-fourth of all such land in the United States.⁷⁸

After Iowa was admitted to the Union, the next stage was to attract more settlers like O’Connor. Community leaders and developers solved this problem by advertising in Eastern papers as well as appealing to European immigrants, stressing that Iowa’s farmlands, fine citizens, free and open society, and ceaseless opportunities could help the state as well as individual immigrants and their families thrive. Leland Sage, in what is considered to be the most definitive book on Iowa history, *The History of Iowa*, finds that “it is generally agreed that letters to friends and relatives did more to encourage settlers to leave their familiar haunts and move west than any other form of persuasion.”⁷⁹ We find among such letters examples like the ones already mentioned from William and Robert Mann and Alex Aitken, who wrote from Iowa to their friends and family in Ireland about how abundant land in Iowa was and how cheaply it could be purchased.

As a result of these letters, advertisements, and other inducements, European immigrants (namely Germans and Irish) steadily entered the Iowa frontier and set up

⁷⁷ Author Unknown, *Biographical and Historical Record of Greene and Carrol Counties, Iowa* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1887), located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/clarebios.htm>.

⁷⁸ Sage, *History of Iowa*, 11.

⁷⁹ Sage, *History of Iowa*, 92.

communities. By 1870, 16.7 percent of Dubuque county residents were born in Ireland, the highest in the state. This was followed by 15.4 percent in Palo Alto County, and 14.1 percent in Allamakee County.⁸⁰ The 1880 census shows the highest levels ever of Irish born living in Iowa, which decreased in following censuses as original immigrants passed away and their offspring were recorded as Irish-Americans, not foreigners. By 1870, there were sons and daughters of Erin in each of the ninety-nine counties in Iowa.⁸¹ Certain counties such as Dubuque and Washington County were much more influenced by immigrant settlement. Washington County had a total of 179 inhabitants from Ireland in 1856, compared with 230 from Germany. Palo Alto County had so many of Irish heritage that in 1899 local members of the community (clearly Irish as evidenced by their surnames), sponsored by the Ancient Order of the Hibernians, put on the popular Irish play “John Driscoll, or the Hero of Wicklow” on St. Patrick’s Day.⁸² A review in the *Palo Alto Reporter* the following week said that the play was set in Wicklow County, Ireland, and presented “the last smouldering embers” of the struggle for liberty by portraying the real life of “one of the last of these heroic leaders to yield to the inevitable and surrender to the English rule.”⁸³

It is also evident how many Irish would populate Iowa when one looks at the different types of records left, such as baptismal records and Catholic graveyard records from around the state. For instance, the Baptismal Register of St. Ambrose Church in Des Moines opened in 1856, and by 1865 approximately eight hundred of the names recorded

⁸⁰ “Percentage of Iowa’s Population Born in Ireland, 1870-1950,” located at States Historical Society Research Center, Iowa City.

⁸¹ “Irish in Iowa by County, 1870,” located at State Historical Society Research Center, Iowa City.

⁸² “The Hero of Wicklow” *Palo Alto Reporter*, Emmetsburg, Palo Alto, Iowa, Friday, March 10, 1899.

⁸³ “The Hero of Wicklow” *Palo Alto Reporter*, Emmetsburg, Palo Alto, Iowa, Friday, March 10, 1899.

were children of Irish descent, at just this one church.⁸⁴ Dubuque county grave records compiled in 1939 list Irish name after Irish name—multitudes of personal stories of hard work and sacrifice. A particularly sad story stands out in the records of the Duggan family buried in the Cemetery at the Monastery Vernon Township. Timothy, a native of Cork, Ireland, and his wife Bridget, a native of Roscommon, Ireland, had four daughters: Margaret, Ellen, Hannah and Bridget. Hannah died almost exactly a month after her father passed away, June 29, 1866 and July 28, 1866 respectively. Margaret would pass next, five years later in 1871 and Ellen would soon follow in 1873. This left the mother and her daughter, both named Bridget. Neither would last long, however, with the mother passing away June 2nd of 1874, leaving her daughter Bridget all alone for three more months, until she too passed on September 7th of the same year. One wonders what afflicted the Duggan family so that all six family members passed away in an eight-year period. It could have been the result of insufficiently treated illness. Frontier families in Iowa often came into contact with infectious diseases such as scarlet fever, and had few remedies to relieve even common colds.⁸⁵ Epidemics of diphtheria, smallpox, and tuberculosis were also problems for many in the nineteenth-century Midwest.⁸⁶ Their story is a reminder of the hardships many Irish families faced in the New World and on the frontier. It was not all green grass and prairies and corn, and escape from death in Ireland did not equate to escape from premature death in Iowa.

⁸⁴ Mary Helen Carey, “The Irish Element in Iowa up to 1865” (M.A. diss., Catholic University of America, 1944).

⁸⁵ Schwieder, “History of Iowa.”

⁸⁶ Philip L. Frana, “Smallpox: Local Epidemics and the Iowa State Board of Health, 1880-1900,” *The Annals of Iowa* 54 (1995): 88. Frana writes that in Iowa between 1800 and 1900, almost 20 percent of deaths involved epidemic diseases: “Tuberculosis accounted for about 10 percent of those deaths caused by epidemic diseases, diphtheria 3 percent, and smallpox less than .5 percent.” Frana, “Smallpox,” 93.

Some immigrants were luckier. An interview with Velma L. Lloyd gives a look at the success of some Irish immigrants in Iowa and validates the statements of Bishop Loras and the Boston *Pilot* about the potential of life in Iowa for Irish immigrants. Written in 1978, it details her memories of her early childhood and what she remembers being told about her grandparents. Her grandparents—O’Connors who dropped the O when they arrived in the United States, supposedly because of all the O’Connors around—settled in Ohio at first, where her grandfather worked on steamboats on the Mississippi River. She told her interviewers that in 1855 he and his brother walked from Lee County to Guthrie County to Panora (a total of over 210 miles), and bought land East of Carroll County, where he started his farm in 1862. Her grandfather bought his land from the government, initially buying a farm of 80 acres and adding land as his financial resources increased, until he eventually owned between 1200 and 1300 acres by the time of his death. In typical Irish fashion (though a radically different scenario because of the sheer vast amount of land), her grandfather divided it up so that all nine of his children received land when he passed.⁸⁷

Similarly, Robert Smythe emigrated from Ireland in 1850 first to Liverpool, England, whereon he sailed to New York. From there he went first to Ohio, where his uncle had settled, then in 1852 he went to Iowa and worked as a hired man in Lee County for two years. Then he moved to Johnson County and bought his first tract of land on the Johnson-Linn County border, eventually accumulating 275 acres and marrying Elizabeth Rohrbacher.⁸⁸ Another success story was that of William Walsh, born in County Galway,

⁸⁷ Oral History interview with Velma L. Lloyd (Conner). Interviewed by Rebecca Conard and Elizabeth Ongley on August 3, 1978 as part of Earthwatch-SHSI Oral History Project, 1978 July-August. Located at the Iowa City Historical Library.

⁸⁸ https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE71982 25

Ireland in 1827. He emigrated at twenty-one years of age across the Atlantic and originally found employment working on the railroad in Pennsylvania. He went on to Allamakee County, Iowa and settled onto his own farm. When he purchased the land it was completely unimproved and wild, covered with timber, but due to what his biographer described as his “characteristic energy and enterprise” he turned three hundred and sixty acres into one of the “finest and best equipped” farms by the time of his death in 1911.⁸⁹ On a smaller level, Thomas Kinney, a native of County Galway, who married Bridget Dorsey, also a native of Ireland, came to the United States with a mere ten dollars, and by 1879 owned a farm of 40 acres with a house and a lot in Anamosa, Iowa.⁹⁰

Others earned money in the eastern seaport cities to save for Iowa land, such as John and Anna McNamara, who came to America in 1856 from Ireland, arriving in New York with only three dollars in their pockets. John went to work for the railroad, and Anna saved money to get to Iowa by taking in boarders—a common and socially acceptable way for wives to earn extra income in the United States in the nineteenth-century. According to their family history, *The McNamara’s of Northeast Iowa: A Compendium of Names and Family History* by H.M. Wahlert, Anna was the spark of the family who told her husband they must save to get to “the country.” In the end, after coming to New York as dirt-poor famine victims, they would own 1,000 acres south of Prairieburg, Iowa.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ellen M. Hancock, *Past and Present in Allamakee County* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1913), located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/galwaybios.htm#broderick>.

⁹⁰ Author Unknown, “Kinney,” in *The History of Jones County, Iowa* (Chicago: Western Hist. Co., 1879), located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/galwaybios.htm>.

⁹¹ H. M. Wahlert, *The McNamara’s of Northeast Iowa: A Compendium of Names and Family History* (Victoria, British Columbia: Trafford Publishing, 2005).

Interviews conducted with Francis Foley in 1978 also detail the success of some Irish immigrants who settled on Iowa farms in nineteenth-century, and who with perseverance and a bit of luck made their fortunes. Foley's grandfather came from Ireland (she is unsure of the date) and bought land from a railroad company in Clinton County, Iowa. Foley said that he bought an astounding eighty acres at a mere six dollars per acre—an amount of land that must have seemed overwhelming to someone from Ireland, where plots of one acre often housed and fed up to ten people. Similar to the Conner family, the eighty acres was passed on to Foley's father and his brothers and sisters. She believes her grandfather left Ireland in search of better opportunities (namely to find better land) and moved west in search of cheap land that he could farm. Confirming Sage's argument that most settlers were drawn out west by reports of family and friends who had gone before them, Foley recounted for her interviewers that her grandparents had previous acquaintances who settled in Iowa before them, who most likely urged them to continue their journey from Ireland to Iowa.⁹²

It is estimated that less than ten percent of the Irish who emigrated to America became farmers, but the examples we have here confirm what the Boston *Pilot* and other sources had been advertising—that the abundant land out west offered an escape from the dirty cities and the destitution accompanying wage labor on the Eastern cities. Iowa could truly be a place of opportunity if the newly arrived Irish immigrants were up for the immense challenge of helping to populate the frontier. They could succeed in establishing a better life for themselves in Iowa than the one they had left behind in Ireland, as well as

⁹² Oral History interview with Francis Foley. Interviewed by Michael Mendelson and Max Wallace on July 14, 1978, as part of Earthwatch-SHSI Oral History Project, 1978 July-August. Located at the Iowa City Historical Library.

a better life than the one possible for them on the already settled East Coast with its lack of land or diversity of jobs available.

Irish Women in Iowa: Negotiating Status and Influence

As is evident from the stories above and other similar ones, Irish men and women came to Iowa with expectations and renewed hope for opportunities the heartland held for them that Ireland no longer could. The history of Irish immigrants in Iowa, for both men and women, needs to be analyzed in their particular historical context. Pre-Famine and post-Famine Ireland was upheld by a patriarchal structure primarily in the figure of the male head of house, but also in the role of the Catholic Church. Much of this patriarchy followed Irish women overseas, despite the numbers who travelled as young single women. Immigration was not a complete escape, and women were not freed from domestic expectations or assumptions. However, life in nineteenth century Iowa did offer significant changes in their status and in their independence that were not available for Irish women in pre-famine Ireland and definitely not in post-famine Ireland. The biggest opportunity for Irish women unavailable in the country they had left behind was in opportunities for wage work outside their home, which will be discussed in much more detail in chapter two. They also found ways to reestablish the social status they had lost in Ireland after the Famine by asserting their agency in a variety of different ways.

The challenge for the historian and the student of Irish-American women's history is not to impose contemporary feminist expectations on a study of nineteenth-century Irish women. The ways Irish female immigrants found in Iowa to recreate the status their gender had lost after the famine and to exist independently needs to be considered in historical context. These women were not thinking of challenging gender roles or a

patriarchal structure that was so familiar to them. But what they were doing to establish their independence and assert status to their gender was incredibly significant.

Irish women in Iowa were unique and deserve to be studied for several reasons. The Irish were not the only immigrant group in Iowa, nor were they the largest. But women of the other ethnic cohorts had different experiences from Irish women, primarily marked by a language barrier. German women, for instance, who arrived in larger numbers than the Irish, faced different challenges and had different experiences as a result often of not speaking English. This limited the types of work they could do and their relations with the white population of their communities, and it would impact the schooling of their children.

Unlike other immigrant women, Irish women were often equal to Irish men in emigration proportions and in several years even exceeded male emigration. Few other ethnic groups had anywhere near a fifty-fifty ratio, let alone a balance that favored women. This gave the Irish female immigrant different opportunities than their counterparts of other ethnicities. As has been discussed, many women emigrated because the United States offered attractive opportunities Ireland no longer could, chances to hold a job and earn wages, find a husband, and establish a degree of independence virtually impossible for both married and unmarried women in post-famine Ireland. All of these opportunities were available in distinct forms in Iowa, and the Ireland that sent them away sanctioned these opportunities, whereas other immigrant women arriving in the nineteenth-century had their opportunities for independence much more constricted by tradition and religion, as well as patterns of emigration.

As has been mentioned, many Irish female emigrants began their lives in the New World on the East Coast. It is difficult to give statistical evidence as to the proportions of Irish women who married before migrating westward to Iowa and the proportions who made the journey as single women (single in terms of relationship status—it is unlikely they would have migrated to Iowa alone, even if they had crossed the Atlantic alone), but it can be inferred from anecdotal evidence that women came who were both single and attached. In addition to the economic pull that Iowa had, many single women heard reports of marriage prospects on the Iowa frontier. From a modern day perspective the pull of marriage opportunities hardly seems like an assertion of female agency, but the nineteenth-century was still a period in which marriage was thought of as an appropriate and expected stage of a woman's life. In addition, recall that the Irish women of this study had all but lost the opportunity to marry in Ireland, as the rate of permanent celibacy increased and a growing importance was placed on a dowry many women could not afford. Often even those who did still marry had lost the chance to choose their partner based on romantic attachments, and instead had their partners chosen for them by male heads of the family, who made the decision based on economics rather than the personal preferences of those involved. Thus regardless of romance, Irish women had lost the chance to make such an important life course decision for themselves.

In this respect, the pull of opportunities for marriage in Iowa is highly understandable and doubtless a reason for many single Irish women's making the journey west. Glenda Riley, a historian who specializes in women in the American West, finds that "it is not surprising then, that many young women capitalized on the population

imbalances in Iowa to further their own marital careers.”⁹³ Indeed, even in May 1884 a matrimonial market report of Albia, Iowa given by the newspaper “The Weekly Albia Union” confirms that “the demand for maidens contains steady and market firm, without being subject to fluctuation.” In language that seems to echo a cattle market report or stock market trends (which is most likely the intended effect), the article goes on to discuss the demand for coquettes remaining steady “yet the market is subject to sudden fluctuations.”⁹⁴

Men understood that female labor was essential to running a farm and did not wish to remain single if they could help it. Single women were desirable in frontier Midwestern communities, giving them the upper hand in choosing marriage partners—something they did not have in either Ireland or in the cities of the East Coast. Besides their economic labor, women were needed to reproduce children who could grow up to help on the farm, and in a vastly spread-out prairie state a female companion was heavily desired simply to help universal human feelings of loneliness.⁹⁵

Iowa Catholic graveyard records and Irish family histories in Iowa indicate a tendency towards inter-Irish marriages. Irish women and men understandably preferred to marry someone who shared their traditions and cultural heritage and their Catholic faith. This preference would help develop Irish settlements in Iowa and ensure a well-developed marriage pool for their children.⁹⁶ This also may have been the result of a

⁹³ Glenda Riley, “The Frontier in Process: Iowa’s Trail Women as a Paradigm.” *Annals of Iowa* 46 (1982): 181, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol46/iss3/2>.

⁹⁴ *Weekly Albia Union*, May 8, 1884.

⁹⁵ Doris Weatherford, *Foreign and Female: Immigrant Women in America, 1840-1930*, (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995), 271.

⁹⁶ Laurie K. Mercier, “‘We Are Women Irish’: Gender, Class, Religious, and Ethnic Identity in Anaconda, Montana,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 44 (1994): 31, accessed July 25, 2015, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/4519649>.

stigma against the Irish keeping them from marrying someone outside their ethnic cohort. But there is also evidence of Irish men and women choosing marriage partners outside of their birth counties. Mary A. Meany, for example, was born in 1819 in County Kilkenny. Her husband, David Lynch, whom she married in Pennsylvania and then moved to Iowa with, was born in County Limerick.⁹⁷ Historian Laurie K. Mercier, in her article “‘We Are Women Irish’: Gender, Class, Religious, and Ethnic Identity in Anaconda, Montana,” argues that while marriages to countrymen reflect a preference for Irish traditions and ties, “such arrangements also symbolized a break from the old country as Irishwomen met Irishmen from unfamiliar counties, independent of parental and parish selections.”⁹⁸ Thus, the selection of marriage partners in Iowa from outside their birth counties is an example of one of the ways Irish women were able to establish a degree of independence in their lives and in their choices that was only possible abroad. While those who remained in Ireland had their marriage partners chosen for them, Irish women in Iowa were allowed the freedom to marry someone of their own choosing and to make that decision for themselves.

The experiences of married Irish women, much like the experiences of married women anywhere and at any time in history, varied depending on their socioeconomic status and thus cannot be summarized under one umbrella experience. Lloyd remembered everyone in her family being responsible for helping on the family farm even though they ultimately became very well-off. Other women from successful farming families assumed separate roles in their family and community and were able to hire servants to perform

⁹⁷ Mary Lynch Young, comp., *Five Lynch Brothers from County Limerick: and Their Descendants, All Born in the United States* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, Inc., 1993).

⁹⁸ Mercier, “We are Women Irish,” 31.

the tasks previously the burden of farm wives.⁹⁹ By the 1830s, a rising American bourgeoisie insisted on strict gender divisions of labor and leisure, meaning women were supposed to stay in the home to nurture their children and provide “an asylum from the world of competitive business” while men left the safety of the hearth to earn money.¹⁰⁰ Wives of the laboring classes had no such luxuries. After marriage they would bring in supplemental income through laundering, seamstress work, taking in boarders, or being dairymaids. Married women across socioeconomic classes used their roles as wives and mothers to exert their influence and take an active part in the process of creating new lives on the Iowa frontier.

Jack Temple Kirby, in his article “Rural Culture in the American Middle West: Jefferson to Jane Smiley,” argues that farming is a quintessentially patriarchal institution. He draws this conclusion from the origins of “farmer” as a masculine noun in Europe and in the “neo-Europes” (places which replicate Europe). In contrast western farm wives are classified as “helpmates” responsible for reproduction in the form of labor and male heirs, and historically also responsible for the production of food for the family as well as dairy products that could be sold for supplemental money.¹⁰¹ Kirby argues that this labor is considered to be subordinate even if in cash-scarce times women’s earnings were crucial to survival, and women have received little status or agency as a result of doing them. This leaves the “yeoman farmwife” to the “deferential negotiation of role and

⁹⁹ Jack Temple Kirby, “Rural Culture in the American Middle West: Jefferson to Jane Smiley,” *Agricultural History* 70 (1996): 587, accessed August 19, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3744075>.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew R.L. Cayton, and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 51.

¹⁰¹ Kirby, “Rural Culture in the American Midwest,” 590 and also Andrew R. L. Cayton, “The Anti-Region: Place and Identity in the History of the American Midwest,” in Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, *The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 153.

priorities with her husband, while simultaneously taking principal responsibility for socializing her children to accept gendered fortunes in farm succession.”¹⁰²

This produced discontent among many farm women, who were frustrated with the lack of rewards or appreciation of their reproductive labors and a desire of more for their female offspring. Women’s work was undoubtedly vital for a successful farm. Their help in the fields with crops and livestock and their work preparing food and doing household chores, manufacturing clothing (such as sewing), and caring for children were just some of their activities. But they were not granted equal power and status for equal work by their husbands and sons. Historian John Mack Faragher believes that status derives not from what people do, but from the recognition they are granted for what they do as well as the authority that comes with that recognition.¹⁰³ Women’s work on the family farms undoubtedly did not give them the status that it should have conferred.

But farm women on the frontier in the nineteenth century did not simply accept their lot in life. Kirby cites Deborah Fink’s *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (a title he finds ironic) for examples of how wives and mothers worked within their roles to challenge the patriarchal structure intertwined in farming. She finds that the isolated farm wives who had to endure lifelong hard labor and “tyrannical, abusive behavior” from their fathers and husbands (including sexual abuse) subverted the agrarian system through nurture. By this, she means these farm wives began a reversal of the “traditional agrarian maternal role of socializing children to

¹⁰² Kirby, “Rural Culture in the American Midwest,” 590.

¹⁰³ John Mack Faragher, “History from the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America,” *American Quarterly* 33 (1981): 541, accessed October 6, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712802>.

acceptance of rural life and patriarchal succession,” instead encouraging offspring, both male and female, to reject the hardships of farm life.¹⁰⁴

In looking at the ways rural culture has been idealized and revered, Fink argues that the agency of these women “conspired with larger economic forces to reduce rural culture to a minor shadow in American life, even in the heartland.”¹⁰⁵ Without women around in rural Iowa, and thus without their reproductive and productive labor, men could only dream of having someone to carry on their family name or carry on the farm.¹⁰⁶

Social reproduction is arguably just as important as biological reproduction. Having several (male) offspring meant nothing if the children were not successfully instructed in the cultural and social values that their society esteemed. Even encouraging daughters to become teachers, like Velma Lloyd whose interview was mentioned earlier, meant one less available farm “help-mate” to ensure the patriarchal structure inherent in farming.

The persistent stereotype of the Irish propensity for drink is well documented throughout Irish and Irish American history. Arrest records of the second half of the nineteenth-century in Scott County, Iowa are full of Irish surnames, such as the case of Pat Doyle, “an irresistible Irishman of police notoriety,” who was charged with drunkenness and fined \$5.¹⁰⁷ Irish women in rural America attempted to use the influence of their role as wives to curb the drinking of their husbands, though their success was varied. Men considered frequent trips to the taverns as innocuous socializing, but women resented the waste of family income on alcohol and their lack of ability to regulate this

¹⁰⁴ Kirby, “Rural Culture in the American Midwest,” 592.

¹⁰⁵ Kirby, “Rural Culture in the American Midwest,” 592.

¹⁰⁶ Kirby, “Rural Culture in the American Midwest,” 597.

¹⁰⁷ Scott County, Iowa Crime Files, “Police Court,” September 26, 1871, located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/scott/crimeno31871.htm>.

aspect of their husband's life, as well as the exclusion that they had also been subjected to in Ireland. They tried to rein in their husbands' tavern visits by monitoring their paychecks, similar to how in Ireland women before the Famine were often responsible for controlling the finances of the family. Irish women would also curtail the drinking of their husbands by sending their children to the bars to bring their fathers home.¹⁰⁸ Single women also suffered the brutishness of the Irish male drinker, such as the case of Irishman John Kilfather in Scott County, Iowa who broke into W.H. Carter's house on a "mission of love" to a servant girl residing there. The case report recorded that Kilfather had no intention of breaking with intent to plunder, but simply wanted to see his "lady love." Kilfather was defended in court by his father, who made a "good argument, worthy of attention, and full of sound Irish pathos and good sense," and so Kilfather got off with only a fine of \$5.30 and an understanding that he would leave the community within sixty days, despite the poor servant girl who was awoken in the middle of the night by a "somewhat intoxicated . . . monomaniac" lying on the dining room floor.¹⁰⁹

The Catholic Church and the institutions of farming and agriculture, supported by the rise of bourgeois ideology in the mid-nineteenth century, tried to instill narrow gender roles for women. But the reality of life with a husband out in the fields all day often required Irish-American women to be the primary decision-makers, especially regarding the children's education and religious training, as well as other financial considerations and group decisions. This echoed how Irish women had been responsible for so many decisions regarding family finances and family emigration back in Ireland. As a result,

¹⁰⁸ Mercier, "We Are Women Irish," 34-35.

¹⁰⁹ Scott County, Iowa Crime Files, "The Housebreaking Case," July 25, 1871, located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/scott/crimeno31871.htm>.

women had to assert their “leadership, authority, and autonomy,” and so Irish-American women in the Midwest were “hardly the passive figures church imagery projected.”¹¹⁰ Sometimes circumstances such as death forced women like Martha Kennedy to step up. After her husband died, Kennedy had to take over running the family farm for almost twenty years.¹¹¹

Irish female immigration to the United States was the result of an accumulation of factors that combined to convince Irish women that more hope lay waiting for them in America than what remained for them in Ireland. The Great Potato Famine drastically changed the social and economic roles of the women who survived the potato blight. Reports from abroad made America seem like a shining land of opportunity. Many women were swayed to continue their journey to the interior of America—the Midwest, and often Iowa. Iowa offered these women what Ireland could not—the chance to be independent, work, find a husband, live on a large farm and assert their autonomy through contributing to the formation of the landscape of the new state. The Irish female experience in Iowa is different because these opportunities existed for them in abundance. While Irish women had similar opportunities in other states, Iowa’s status as a new frontier state in need of populating and people to shape its cultural and social formation meant that Irish women had a unique chance to establish themselves in ways that could help them regain some of the social status they had lost in post-Famine Ireland.

¹¹⁰ Mercier, “We are Women Irish,” 38

¹¹¹ Betty Nicholas McMurry, *The Kennedy Family of Iowa* (Tucson: B.N.B. McMurry, 1999), 12.

Chapter Two: The Work of Irish Immigrant Women on the Nineteenth-Century Iowa Frontier

The massive wave of women who left a life of redundancy in Ireland after the Great Famine found in the United States expanding areas of labor eager to employ the newly arrived immigrants. Irish female immigrants in the nineteenth-century U.S. had more employment opportunities available to them than did their male counterparts, which explains why so many Irish families sent women abroad instead of men, and partly explains the greater percentages of Irish female immigrants in post-Famine Irish emigration statistics. While Irish and other groups of immigrant men found jobs in factory work and on the frontier in railroad and canal work, Irish women were pulled abroad not only by stories of the factory labor opportunities available, but also the promise of an abundance of domestic service positions. With the rise of the middle-class in the nineteenth-century United States, domestic service from the antebellum era to World War I became an employment sector in which demand exceeded supply, and more than any other ethnic group, the Irish took advantage of this need. Irish women who had become unnecessary about the family farm after the Famine also regained part of their lost value in the agricultural industry of Iowa after marriage. As factory workers and domestics, they made vital contributions to the newly established enterprises on the Iowa frontier—its industries and family farms.

After living through the agricultural wrecking ball of the Great Potato Famine, Irish immigrants did not rush to the interior United States. But many male and female immigrants were lured to Iowa as a result of advertisements, letters from family and

friends who had already established themselves in the new state, and others promising land, work and a prosperity impossible in the crowded Eastern seaport cities. Iowa provides an interesting lens through which to study the labor of Irish women in the nineteenth-century United States. Unlike the already settled Eastern cities in which the majority of immigrants made their homes, Iowa was in need of women to help shape the landscape of the new frontier state. John B. Newhall's 1846 guide to Iowa listed only dairymaid as a possible vocation for women (assuming, he wrote, they "thoroughly understand making butter and cheese, and salting butter for a distant market"¹¹²). But there is plentiful evidence that suggests that prior to marriage, opportunities for work for women were abundant on the Iowa frontier. Single women were needed to work as domestic servants for the many families in Iowa who were finding their footing on the new land they had purchased quite cheaply; they now required cheap labor to relieve mistresses of their more arduous duties. Although unpaid and often unacknowledged, wives were also needed on the Iowa farms in ways similar to those found on pre-Famine farms in Ireland. They were needed to tame the wild prairie and start a successful farm, bring in supplemental cash, help their husbands with income-producing activities, as well as reproduce and populate the frontier state. Religious women, freed from the constraints of marriage and child-rearing, also made important and lasting contributions to institutions in the new state of Iowa.

Many general histories of the labor of working-class Irish immigrants in the nineteenth-century United States have been written, but the scholarship has been focused

¹¹² John B. Newhall, "A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846," ed. William J. Petersen (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1957).

on the work of men.¹¹³ This is hardly surprising given the aforementioned smaller body of work in general on Irish women, as well as the similarly smaller amount of scholarship on women's labor as compared to men's. A few works on the labor of Irish women have looked at their influence on the labor movement in Industrial America, such as research by Suellen Hoy and Patricia A. Lamoureux.¹¹⁴ The authors of many comprehensive studies of the experiences of Irish women in the United States have spent time looking at their opportunities for work, such as the influential and groundbreaking studies of Hasia Diner and Janet Nolan, but this is interspersed in larger surveys of the experiences of Irish female emigrants.¹¹⁵ Other women's historians have looked at the influence of women's work on the frontier in the nineteenth century, such as Norton Juster's *So Sweet to Labor: Rural Women in America 1865-1895* and Nancy Grey Osterud's "Gender and the Transition to Capitalism in Rural America."¹¹⁶ But such scholarship is inclusive of many ethnic groups.

Many scholars have written about the immense employment sector of domestic service in nineteenth-century America, but most studies are overviews of foreign and American participation in the domestic service sector, not limited to the experience of

¹¹³ David N. Doyle, "Un-established Irishmen: New Immigrants and Industrial America, 1870-1910," in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983) and David N. Doyle, "The Irish and American Labour, 1880-1920," *Saothar: Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, 1 (1975).

¹¹⁴ Hoy, Suellen, "The Irish Girls' Rising: Building the Women's Labor Movement in Progressive-era Chicago," *Labor* 1 (2012), 77-100 and Lamoureux, Patricia A., "Irish Catholic Women and the Labor Movement," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 16 (Summer 1998), 24- 44.

¹¹⁵ Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) and Janet Nolan, *Ourselves Alone: Women's Emigration From Ireland, 1885-1920*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989).

¹¹⁶ Norton, Juster, *So Sweet to Labor: Rural Women in America 1865-1895* (New York: The Viking Press, 1979) and Nancy Grey Osterud, "Gender and the Transition to Capitalism in Rural America" *Agricultural History* 67 (1993):14-29, accessed September 5, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3744047>.

Irish women. April Schultz and Peter Flynn have both looked at the experiences of specifically Irish women in domestic service, but Schultz's work is a comparative study which does not solely focus on Irish women, and Flynn's study is of the social meaning behind the portrayal of Irish domestics in early American cinema versus a focus on their labor activities. Neither researcher narrows the focus of study to a regional area. While very specific studies of Irish male labor in the nineteenth-century United States have been written, there is a gap in similar specific studies of the work of Irish women and particularly in a detailed study of the labor of exclusively Irish women.

This chapter goes beyond the work of other historians of Irish female immigrants in the United States to focus on the distinct labor of Irish women in nineteenth-century Iowa. It combines historiography on Irish female labor in general; studies of nineteenth-century women's work especially in the Midwest and in rural areas; an abundance of scholarship on domestic service from the antebellum era to the end of the century; and primary sources that place the analysis in the context of a study specific to female Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century Iowa. Iowa is a distinctive setting within which to study Irish female labor because the newness of the state at the time of the immigrants' arrival meant that settler groups contributed to shaping the landscape of the new state in significant ways, as opposed to already settled states like Massachusetts and New York. Janet Nolan, one of the pioneer scholars of Irish and Irish-American women's history, wrote in 2009 that the role of Irish women is essential to understanding American labor history since Irish women (as opposed to most other European female immigrants) were usually single when they arrived in the United States and thus were overrepresented in

the public world of work.¹¹⁷ This chapter contributes to the very large gap of such scholarship on the female Irish role in the American workforce.

A study of the labor activities of Irish women in nineteenth-century Iowa has distinctive challenges. True, there is no language barrier to keep historians from gaining insight into the lives of these women, as there might be for a study of German female immigrants in Iowa. But a domestic servant who had to prepare breakfast in the morning before her employers were even awake and who then worked backbreaking tasks all day until finally collapsing at night hardly had time to write her experiences down. Nor did the farm wife who had to milk the cows, help her husband in the fields, and care for her children in addition to cooking, doing laundering, and tending fowl and vegetable gardens. This study is also made difficult because official records of the time often list women as “not gainfully employed,” ignoring the many wage-earning activities both single and married women might do. Or they only report dairymaid or an occupation equally constricting and surely not representative of the real activities nineteenth-century women engaged in. An 1880 mortality schedule of persons of Irish descent in Van Buren County lists “At Home,” “Keeping House,” “House Keeper,” and “Housework” as typical occupations for the Irish women of the county.¹¹⁸ Thus this study has to rely heavily on male accounts of the period, such as newspaper articles and obituaries, which give clues as to what types of employment women preferred and how this changed over time. It must also depend on the hindsight of family histories written many years after the

¹¹⁷ Janet Nolan, “Women’s Place in the History of the Irish Diaspora: A Snapshot,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28 (2009): 78, Accessed July 18, 2015, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/40543472>.

¹¹⁸ The Irish in Iowa, “1880 Mortality Schedule-Iowa: Persons of Irish Ancestry, Van Buren County,” located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/1880irishmortality.htm>.

historical period described. Nevertheless these records are historically valuable because of what families said about the private family records they have managed to retain. This chapter also utilizes biographies written at the turn of the twentieth century, which typically describe well-to-do Irish men from various Iowa counties, with often a bare sentence about their wives—sometimes useful, sometimes not.

Irish immigrant women who arrived in the United States had to immediately set upon the task of finding work to support themselves. As mentioned in the first chapter, Irish immigrants typically arrived in the United States so destitute that finding some form of employment was an urgent necessity. As in Ireland, Irish female labor in the nineteenth-century Midwest depended significantly on women's marital status, and work in general had the same division of labor abroad as at home. Young and single Irish women typically worked as domestic servants, but married or widowed (older) women helped on their family's farms.¹¹⁹ Single women were heavily overrepresented in domestic service because it allowed them to save up their wages while living under the care of a respectable household where room and board was included.

Married Irish women were more likely than those in some immigrant groups to not engage in wage work after marriage (though their other income-earning activities will be explored later in this chapter), but both single and married Irish women entered into factory work in large numbers, particularly on the East Coast. This reflects the reality of the era. Despite bourgeois notions of women's place being in the home, all men did not support all women and some married women had to labor outside the home for their

¹¹⁹ Laurie K. Mercier, "'We Are Women Irish': Gender, Class, Religious, and Ethnic Identity in Anaconda, Montana," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 44 (1994): 31, Accessed July 25, 2015, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/4519649>.

family's survival. One working woman's statement from the period after the Civil War described the factory as a "world in which thousands of women enter each year, not because they choose but because they are forced into it by a dilemma on whose horns are written 'work or starve.'"¹²⁰ Factory employment was a growing sector of jobs for immigrant women, in part due to Civil War needs. Ardis Cameron, in her book *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts 1860-1912*, argues that the daughters (and sons) of Erin were overwhelmingly the largest newcomer group to take advantage of the wartime boom of the industries of Lawrence, Massachusetts. By the end of the Civil War, the Irish made up more than 65 percent of Lawrence's foreign-born population.¹²¹

Domestic Service and the Concentration of Irish Female Immigrants

As discussed in the first chapter, Irish women arrived in similar numbers to Irish men and at times even outnumbered them. Most of these female immigrants were single as opposed to traveling as part of a family unit. This meant the labor these female Irish immigrants engaged in in the United States allowed them to seek their fortunes independently of a patriarchal family unit.¹²² The most common form of employment for female immigrants from Ireland was domestic service, which was widely available in all areas of the country. Open domestic service positions were practically ubiquitous in American life between the Civil War and World War I, with more and more American

¹²⁰ Alice M. Reynolds, "Labor Conditions in New England, 1860-1870, with Special Reference to Massachusetts" (M.A. diss., University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1915).

¹²¹ Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860-1912* (Place: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 29.

¹²² Janet Nolan, "Women's Place in the History of the Irish Diaspora: A Snapshot," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28 (2009): 77, accessed July 18, 2015, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/40543472>

households aspiring towards middle-class notions of affluence and domesticity hiring at least one maid as a way to show off wealth as well as keep up with rising Victorian standards of housekeeping. This section looks at the widely expressed need for servants in nineteenth-century Iowa and the experiences of the Irish immigrant women who helped fulfill that need. The Irish immigrant women who took advantage of the almost endless supply of jobs available to them as domestic servants endured discrimination and were often subjected to constant reminders from employers of their subordinate social positions. But domestic service also provided a convenient way to save a high percentage of their earnings, taught women skills they could later use in their own households, and since so many Irish immigrants were single women, it solved the problem of finding a respectable and safe place to live in the years before marriage.

Daniel Sutherland, in his book *Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920*, finds three interconnected reasons for what he calls the “insatiable” desire for servants during this period.¹²³ The physical strain of housekeeping standards during the Victorian era simply could not be accomplished without help. Servants “were needed to save American women from the dirt, monotony, and drudgery of their own homes.”¹²⁴ American women during the majority of the nineteenth century were expected to oversee the home, but as wives and mothers they were also assigned far more pressing responsibilities as “moral and spiritual guardian of the home,” which did not leave enough time left over “to toil in dust and cinders.” The middle-class American housewife was responsible for teaching future generations

¹²³ Daniel E. Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

¹²⁴ Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants*, 10-11.

“morality, virtue, and republicanism,” a demanding role that took up most of her time.¹²⁵ The third reason for the intensified need for servants from the Civil War to World War I was status. Americans were materialistic, and servants were believed to be the ultimate means of “conspicuous display” for both the wealthy and the rising middle classes. Merchants, clerks, and their wives wanted proof of their fortunes and joined old-money families in their willingness to spend a disproportionate amount of their income on servants.¹²⁶ The Ormsby family of Palo Alto County, Iowa, published a newspaper ad in 1899 that stated: “WANTED. A girl for general housework. Family small, work light.”¹²⁷ Every middle-class family had to have at least one domestic servant, no matter what their actual need.

The Irish dominated in filling this need from their arrival in the 1840s and on, accounting for 39% of domestic servants, with Germans following behind at second place with 22%.¹²⁸ Irish immigrant women took advantage of the need for servants more than any other ethnic group, in part because the Irish did not have a language barrier between themselves and their employers like German immigrant women often had.¹²⁹ In the post-famine years between 1851 and 1921, 27% of Irish immigrants to the United States were females between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, the cohort most likely to enter domestic service.¹³⁰ Domestic service appealed to Irish women and other female

¹²⁵ Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants*, 11-12.

¹²⁶ Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants*, 14. Sutherland writes that as much as one-third of income was spent among less well-off families for servants.

¹²⁷ “Wanted,” published in the *Palo Alto Reporter*, Emmetsburg, Palo Alto, Iowa. February 10, 1899. Located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/paloalto/addlnews.htm>.

¹²⁸ Doris Weatherford, *Foreign and Female: Immigrant Women in America, 1840-1930* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995), 246.

¹²⁹ Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 61.

¹³⁰ Urban, Andrew, “Irish Domestic Servants, ‘Biddy,’ and Rebellion in the American Home, 1850-1900,” *Gender & History* 21 (2009), 264, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0424.2009.01548.x.

immigrants for several reasons. As mentioned, it allowed unskilled women to support themselves and save up a considerable amount of money since room, board, and often clothing came with the job and thus servants could save almost their entire incomes. An 1879 article in *The Burlington (Iowa) Daily Hawk-Eye* pointed out that wages for servants were almost completely net earnings.¹³¹ Servant girls did not have to pay for board, rent, washing, fuel or light. Thus, even when a girl's wages were as low as \$2.00, they could lay almost the entire amount aside and send their earnings home in the form of remittances, save for their future, or (perhaps for the first time in their lives) buy some luxury goods or fine clothing.

Continuing in the article about domestic servants, the journalist of the *Hawk-Eye* asked, "How many men who employ them, and who sit moodily in the parlor while they sit happily in the kitchen, have so much clear money after a month's speculation, or a month's disaster?" Very few other sectors of employment in the nineteenth-century allowed workers to save such a high percentage of a month's wages, especially among relatively unskilled and uneducated laborers. The laboring class of Irish men had few employment opportunities that could allow them to save such a high percentage of their earnings. In Fort Dodge, Iowa by the end of the century, employers were offering up to \$4 a week for "girls."¹³² Such wages for relatively unskilled labor were obviously a huge draw for women wishing to send remittances home and save up money for marriage.

Domestic service was an important employment opportunity for Irish women in that it allowed them to gain an economic independence almost impossible in post-Famine Ireland. Women became valued members of Irish families again as it was understood

¹³¹ *Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye*, "Servant Girls Wages," October 29, 1879.

¹³² *Iowa State Register*, September 22, 1899.

that—unlike Irish men—they could be sent to the United States and almost assuredly earn money. They could send a portion of these earnings home in the form of remittances to take care of family members who remained as well as finance the continued exodus of those who wanted to emigrate. But even though it might have been expected and hoped that Irish girls working as domestics would send some of their earnings home, ultimately they could do with their wages what they chose—mail them home, save, spend or even invest. Most Irish domestics had complete control of their finances. Because they did not have to pay for room and board their lives were not dictated by basic necessities, and because they were on their own thousands of miles from home, their earnings could not be controlled by a patriarchal family figure.

In an article in the *Daily Davenport Democrat* from August 29, 1865 titled “Domestics Wanted,” the journalist suggested that “perhaps no species of labor is wanted in Iowa, at the present time so badly as that of female cooks and household servants. Everybody is searching for servant girls, and the supply is not one-third equal to the demand.”¹³³ Even though “the best of wages and the most desirable situations” were being offered, the offers were futile. The author of the article detailed how servant girls were desperate for jobs and hungry in the big cities, and Iowa towns were in need of their help and were sending to East Coast cities offers of rewards for women who would be willing to relocate to Iowa to work. The author wrote that “while our large cities are teeming with homeless young females, treading near the brink of starvation and dishonor, the towns and cities of Iowa are calling for them in vain—offering the most powerful inducements.” The writer ended by asking: “Ladies, you are sadly in want of aid, you

¹³³ *Daily Davenport Democrat*, “Domestics Wanted,” August 29, 1865.

have the means of rewarding labor, and now who will move in this matter?”¹³⁴ Clearly opportunities for domestic service in Iowa were widely available and continued to be one of the few sectors of employment in which demand exceeded supply, as evidenced by local newspaper articles. For example, the August 25th, 1871 issue of the *Sioux City Daily Journal* reported that “domestic enjoyment is interfered with to a considerable extent in Keokuk just now by the scarcity of servant girls.”¹³⁵ The *Davenport Gazette* wrote in 1886 that servants were so scarce in the Cedar Rapids area that an agent had started a business of canvassing for desirable female help.¹³⁶

The prevalence of open positions made domestic service appealing to women embarking across the Atlantic as they could practically be assured of a job whereas men could not. Doris Weatherford, in her analysis of the work experiences of immigrant women in America from 1840-1930, argues that getting inside an American home was one of the fastest ways to learn about the country, an important benefit to employment in service.¹³⁷ Domestic service was also appealing because it was an extension of the kind of work Irish women had been trained to do on family farms, it allowed Irish girls to meet other Irish female servants, and there was a social hierarchy to domestic service that gave the Irish hope of occupational mobility, something factory work lacked. It also solved the problem of housing and of living on their own as single women in a new and strange country.¹³⁸ Similar to elsewhere in the nation, young Irish immigrants were the most likely to be employed in domestic service. According to the 1870 Dubuque County, Iowa

¹³⁴ *Daily Davenport Democrat*, August 29, 1865.

¹³⁵ *Sioux City Daily Journal*, August 25, 1871.

¹³⁶ *Davenport Gazette*, November 15, 1886.

¹³⁷ Weatherford, *Foreign and Female*, 248.

¹³⁸ Nolan, *Ourselves Alone*, 78.

census, the average age for an Irish woman employed in the service industry was 24.75. Seventy-seven percent of Irish servants in Dubuque County in 1870 were under the age of 28, and twenty-nine percent were teenagers.¹³⁹

The skills and experiences single female Irish immigrants gained in employment, particularly in domestic service, prepared them for marriage as well as made them more attractive potential spouses. In Irish communities especially, the ability of women to earn wages only served to enhance their status, and potential Irish husbands valued wives who could add to the family coffers even after marriage.¹⁴⁰ Because so many Irish women arrived in the United States young and single, domestic service was a convenient stopgap. Mary Dunbar was employed as a domestic upon arrival in the United States in 1852, and she continued in the occupation until her marriage in 1856 to John Dunbar, with whom she moved to Sac County, Iowa and became one of the first settlers of the area.¹⁴¹ The same was the case for Johanna O'Connor, who emigrated with her family from Ireland in 1860 and moved to Clinton, Iowa, so that her father could be employed by the railroads. In 1870, Johanna and her sister moved to Council Bluffs, where she was employed in several homes as a servant until she married Patrick O'Connor. Three years later in 1877, the pair purchased a farm northwest of Imogene, Iowa, where they would reside and raise their family for the next fourteen years.¹⁴²

Jack Temple Kirby detailed the progression by which domestic servants came to be desired by so many families in the rural Midwest, connecting it to the rise of a rural

¹³⁹ 1870 Dubuque County Census-Nativity Ireland, located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/irishcensus.htm>.

¹⁴⁰ Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort*, 40.

¹⁴¹ Peter Flynn, "How Bridget Was Framed: The Irish Domestic in Early American Cinema, 1895-1917," *Cinema Journal* 50 (2011): 6, accessed August 11, 2015, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/41240691>.

¹⁴² Author Unknown, *The Fremont County Herald* (Sidney: Fremont Co.1925).

western bourgeoisie (as opposed to the urban upper middle-class or the large landowning families of New England). Settlers in the early years converged on the new territories and states of the Middle West and established farms and towns almost entirely without slaves. They fed themselves and their family off of the land and also participated in commerce such as droving cattle and hogs (moving livestock over a large period of land in order to take them to market), which allowed them to buy land and tools, pay taxes, and purchase small necessities with cash. Kirby found that for at least a generation, families performed most of the labor of production, and communities were based on family labor exchanges, concluding that the “first generations of middle westerners, then, might be said to have lived in a market world, but were not of it.”¹⁴³ They used capital and earned profits, but a family’s objectives on the harsh and untamed frontier were survival and security, not prosperity.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the population had grown rapidly, and canals and railroads shrank the distances between communities, inviting increased participation in commercial markets. A pamphlet published in 1870 by the Iowa Board of Immigration wrote that “already we have over *two thousand miles of railroad* to carry away the surplus produce of this small fraction of the aggregate area of our state.”¹⁴⁴ The changed environment, argues Kirby, “encouraged further capitalist enterprise, in agriculture itself as well as supporting services,”¹⁴⁵ such as meatpacking plants and an oats processing plant that would be come to be called Quaker Oats.¹⁴⁶ The completion of

¹⁴³ Jack Temple Kirby, “Rural Culture in the American Middle West: Jefferson to Jane Smiley,” *Agricultural History* 70 (1996): 586, accessed August 19, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3744075> .

¹⁴⁴ Iowa Board of Immigration, “Iowa, the Home for Immigrants,” 1870, 28.

¹⁴⁵ Kirby, “Rural Culture,” 587.

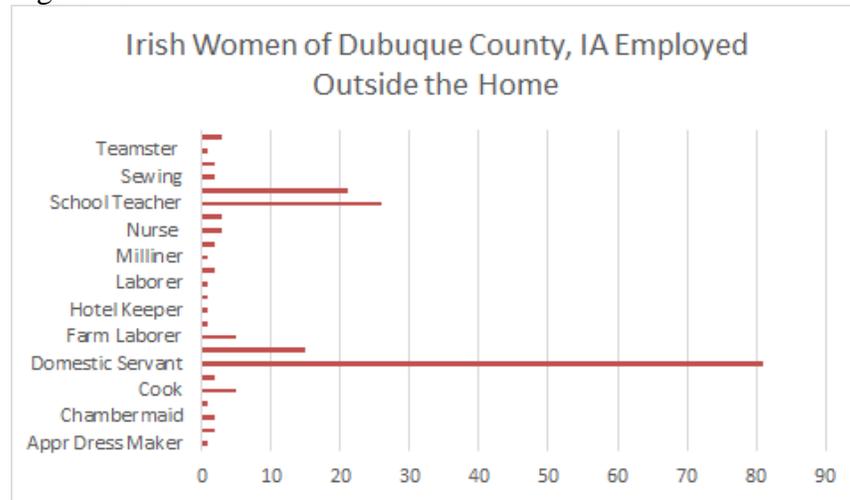
¹⁴⁶ Dorothy Schwieder, “History of Iowa,” *Iowa Official Register*.

railroads cutting across the state and Chicago's nearby location as a leading railroad center meant that the corn, wheat, beef, and pork raised by Iowa's farmers could be transported through Chicago on the way to the East Coast, and from there, to the rest of the world.¹⁴⁷ Thus, the rising profits from surpluses and increased interactions with a commercial world led to the increase in leading men in communities who owned farms so large that they now needed to hire unrelated workers to help run them. The creation of this group of community leaders who owned large profitable farms meant that a few families attained middle and upper-middle class status. Servants were needed to take over menial and unpleasant household tasks so that the new class of farm wives could assume separate spheres in their families and middle class roles in their communities.¹⁴⁸ Thus, the growing need for servant girls in rural states such as Iowa as the century wore on. Figure 2.1 from the Dubuque County census of 1870, focused on women of Irish descent, shows domestic service was by far the most common form of employment for Irish immigrant women in Iowa who worked for wages, with a total of eighty-one women identifying as domestic servants in one county.

¹⁴⁷ Schweider, "History of Iowa."

¹⁴⁸ Kirby, "Rural Culture," 587.

Figure 2.1¹⁴⁹



Despite the well-known need for servant girls, American Protestants all over the country disdained the Irish girls who helped fill the need. Iowa newspapers and Protestant mistresses joined in expressing dissatisfaction with the preponderance of Catholic Irishwomen available to be hired. Since servants shared such close quarters with their employers, families wanted servants of backgrounds similar to their own. Most wanted native-white Protestant girls, or at the very least, anyone who was not Irish.¹⁵⁰ Misunderstandings and fears among American Protestants towards Catholics led to a strong disinclination among employers towards hiring Irish Catholic girls as servants. They feared the intrusion of Catholic religious practices in their homes and the intimate access servants would have to their Protestant employers' lapses in spiritual life, and were suspicious of letting someone with such a "foreign" religion as Catholicism care for

¹⁴⁹ 1870 Dubuque County Census-Nativity Ireland, located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/irishcensus.htm>. Note: this census includes both women born in Ireland living in Iowa in 1870 and women living in Iowa in 1870 born outside of Ireland who have one or more parents (typically both) whose nativity is Ireland. For the purposes of comparison, the occupations of "At Home" and "Keeping House" were removed from the data of this chart.

¹⁵⁰ Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants*, 39.

their children. Some employers worried about “Popish treachery” when their domestics attended mass, but also worried about irreligion when they did not go.¹⁵¹ Many employers thus began to advertise the well-known “No Irish Need Apply” signs while looking for domestics. A typical ad reflecting the bias against Irish Catholic servants said “Wanted-at 95 Montgomery Street, A GIRL, to take care of children and do plain sewing. None but Protestants need apply.”¹⁵² A journalist for *The Sioux City Daily Journal*, on June 28th, 1873, wrote that servant girls were in demand and complained that the Norwegian girls were the best servants in the city but wished to be excused from service during harvest time to make more money (they could get \$3.50 to \$5 a week in service, but in the field they could get \$2 to \$3 a day).¹⁵³ In November of 1872, a journalist from the same Iowa news outlet mourned the loss of “one of the best servant girls that ever honored Sioux City” to marriage, “a fate to which all good servant girls very early come.” The author wrote that the girl and her husband were Norwegian, “and that goes far to prove their industrious and good character,” as opposed to Irish girls, whose characters and housekeeping talents were often held up for criticism.¹⁵⁴

The high percentages of Irish Catholic females employed in domestic service gave rise to the “Bridget” stereotype. Media Historian Peter Flynn, in an analysis of the Bridget figure in early American cinema, argued that “Bridget” was a “comic projection of bourgeois American anxieties over the great influx of Irish immigrants following the famine years of the 1840s.”¹⁵⁵ Because Irish girls became synonymous with female

¹⁵¹ Dudden, *Serving Women*, 69.

¹⁵² Dudden, *Serving Women*, 70.

¹⁵³ *Sioux City Daily Journal*, June 28, 1873.

¹⁵⁴ *Sioux City Daily Journal*, “A Happy Marriage—And How They Do Out West,” November 23, 1872/

¹⁵⁵ Peter Flynn, “How Bridget Was Framed: The Irish Domestic in Early American Cinema, 1895-1917,” *Cinema Journal* 50 (2011): 1, accessed August 11, 2015. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/41240691> .

domestic help, “Bridget” had to shoulder the problems of the new urban bourgeois families and “manifested all the unsavory appetites and characteristics that had to be repressed (or at least hidden) in order to construct the ideal Victorian woman, symbol of the upright middle-class home and moral center of post-Reconstruction America.” “Bridget” was ignorant, clumsy, loud, a “monstrous feminine id rising up from the basement.”¹⁵⁶ She was the extreme characterization of everyone's servant problems and what American employers believed to be the characteristic faults of domestics everywhere. The Irish domestic stereotype was also obsessed with earning as much money as possible. Instead of romanticizing the remittances Irish Catholic domestics sent home to Ireland, employers complained about their efforts to maximize earnings with a minimum exertion of labor.¹⁵⁷ On the shoulders of the Irish were placed everyone's servant problems. Caroline White declared herself “heartily sick of the Irish” and “sick of all the race,” and claimed that her servant problem would be solved if she could only find good Protestant girls. Her husband apparently joked that the best excuse for a suicide was “I kept Irish domestics.”¹⁵⁸

Nineteenth-century American fiction writer Harriet Prescott Spofford published a book out of Boston in 1881 describing the nature of servitude in nineteenth-century United States and offering advice for both employers and employees, *The Servant Girl Question*. This book allows for a remarkable opportunity to examine nineteenth-century Protestant American opinions about the service occupation as well as Protestant American opinions on the prevalence of Irishwomen employed in it. This work was an

¹⁵⁶ Flynn, “How Bridget Was Framed,” 1-2.

¹⁵⁷ Dudden, *Serving Women*, 66.

¹⁵⁸ Dudden, *Serving Women*, 59.

answer to the “servant girl problem” discussed widely at the time, which complained that there were no good servants anymore.¹⁵⁹ Spofford argued that only when the principle of mutual obligation between mistress and maid was understood could the “loud complaint in relation to domestic service (which) rings through the land” cease.¹⁶⁰ Several Iowa newspapers of the postbellum era also reflect a notion of a servant problem in the Midwest. The Fort Dodge *Northwest Chronicle* published an article on July 23, 1890 which wrote that:

The servant girl trouble continues to agitate the gentle homes of the city and in all parts of the city, demands for increases in wages are heard of and if refused the girls are quitting and the trouble is that it seems impossible to secure another girl unless the advance demanded by the girls quitting is granted to the new girl.¹⁶¹

The “servant problem” has been discussed by many historians. While Spofford does see the issue as two-sided between both mistresses and maids, she does not fully comprehend one of the fundamental problems inherent in service. Domestic servants were constantly reminded of the disparity between their lives and the lives of their employers, which exacerbated any feelings of discontent about more “trivial” aspects of service such as long hours, limited social opportunities, or poor sleeping quarters.¹⁶² “Bridget” was kept well aware that she was in some respects a member of the household

¹⁵⁹ In 1892, Professor Lucy Maynard Salmon published a history of domestic service in the United States, in which she found that the employers she interviewed “romanticised about a ‘golden age’ of domestic service, when they were able to hire co-religionists and native-born Americans.” Andrew Urban, “Irish Domestic Servants, ‘Biddy,’ and Rebellion in the American Home, 1850-1900,” *Gender and History* [Oxford], 21 (2009), 265.

¹⁶⁰ Harriet Prescott Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1881), 9.

¹⁶¹ *Northwest Chronicle* (Fort Dodge), July 23, 1890.

¹⁶² Flynn, “How Bridget Was Framed,” 6 and Andrew Urban “Irish Domestic Servants, ‘Biddy,’ and Rebellion in the American home, 1850-1900,” *Gender and History* [Oxford], 21 (2009), 263-86.

while at the same time someone alien and foreign. This naturally produced displeasure among servants, especially if they had to live among the relative comfort and luxury of their employers and felt as if they were not being paid justly.

Spofford's book reflects the absolute obsession with domestic service in the second half of the nineteenth-century as increasing numbers of households sought to have at least one servant. It also highlights an awareness of the dominance of Irish girls in service positions. Women who employed servants were almost constantly talking about their servants and anyone listening in on such conversations would almost certainly "catch the names of Bridget or Nora in their colloquy."¹⁶³ When the stereotyped "Bridget" does good work enough cannot be said about that "astonishing circumstance" (reflecting the perceived inadequacy of Irish domestics). And when she is bad, "she is horrid."¹⁶⁴

As has been noted, one of the reasons domestic service appealed to Irish female immigrants was because they could use it as a temporary form of employment to earn money until they married. Flynn argues that marriage was often the only realistic chance for Irish domestics to escape the harsh and demanding conditions of service, and "consequently the quest for romance took on an added urgency, even obsessiveness."¹⁶⁵ Irish women, who often left Ireland in hopes of better opportunities for getting married in the New World, sometimes migrated west to places like Iowa to take advantage of population imbalances on the rural frontier. Marriage was still seen during this period as the most important stage in a woman's life, and so for women who escaped an Ireland

¹⁶³ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 15.

¹⁶⁴ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 16.

¹⁶⁵ Flynn, "How Bridget Was Framed," 6.

which was bleak as regards to romantic options, it is not surprising that a factor in their migration to Iowa was due to rumors of a surplus of male settlers.¹⁶⁶ This explains the “unrestrained sexuality” associated with the Bridget stereotype. Maids were supposedly obsessed with men and were not subtle or private about it, which was exactly the opposite of how an “American woman” was supposed to behave. The stereotype of a sex-crazed “Bridget” is very clearly reflected in the following anecdote from an April 28, 1899 article in the *Iowa State Bystander*:

Lady (engaging servant)—As there are several children, I hope you are very guarded in your conduct. Bridget —Shure, mum, I've two swatehearts— one's a policeman and the other is a soldier. Could I be better guarded, now?¹⁶⁷

This characterization of “Bridget” was at its heart a symbol of middle-class Protestant Americans’ fear of the immigrant labor sweeping the country. They realized what an insecure position this dependence put them in, as their reliance grew more heavily on a lower-class of women workers who might, it was believed, drop everything for sex. This put the power in the hands of the workers, who held great bargaining powers over a middle-class society “weakened by affluence.”¹⁶⁸ In reality, this was only a projection of power, put onto people who were in fact economically disadvantaged.

The fact that domestic service was not viewed as a permanent vocation helped Irish women endure the burdens that came with it, such as the often harsh supervision, long hours, endless tasks, lack of independence, obvious disdain from their American

¹⁶⁶ Glenda Riley, “The Frontier in Process: Iowa’s Trail Women as a Paradigm,” *Annals of Iowa* 46 (1982):180-181, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol46/iss3/2>.

¹⁶⁷ *The Iowa State Bystander*, “Made in England,” April 28, 1899. Located at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84038095/1899-09-15/ed-1/seq-7.pdf>.

¹⁶⁸ Flynn, “How Bridget Was Framed,” 11.

employers, and threat of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.¹⁶⁹ Irish domestics also had to adjust (often with some difficulty) to new customs in Iowa. One young girl who entered service in Iowa wrote a letter home to County Donegal complaining about prohibition: “This country is not as good as it was, they are not allowed to sell no more liquor in the state of Iowa.”¹⁷⁰ The indignity believed to be a part of work in service was what deterred native American girls as the occupation progressed from hiring local girls as “help” who would sit at the dining table with the rest of the family to hiring designated domestic servants believed to be of an entirely different status. Spofford wrote that employers of domestic servants often “feel about them (domestic servants) as if they were as different a race from ourselves as though they were chimpanzees.”¹⁷¹

But Spofford urged readers to share in sympathy towards their young female maids, especially the poor state of the maid-of-all-work girl, the only domestic employed in a home tasked with doing everything the mistress least wants to do.¹⁷² This girl, fresh from her voyage across the sea, had to adjust to strange domestic tasks she was unprepared for after having worked mainly at outside work in Ireland. She was now “bent over back-aching ironing-boards and terrible scrubbing-brushes; her whole life enlisted for a continual warfare with dirt and discomfort, glad at night to creep away to the dark and dismal little room assigned her.”¹⁷³ The maid-of-all-work, employed on her own in

¹⁶⁹ Dudden, *Serving Women*, 203 and 210.

¹⁷⁰ Dudden, *Serving Women*, 201.

¹⁷¹ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 13.

¹⁷² Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants*, 10. According to Sutherland, the majority of American families, probably three-fourths, had only one or two servants. The maid-of-all-work typically performed all household work, though sometimes laundry was taken out of the house. Sutherland writes that within the first four or five hours of her day she usually performed the morning duties of cook, chambermaid, parlor maid, and footman. In rural areas such maids would, in addition to the usual chores of cooking, ironing, and cleaning the house, would also be tasked with milking cows, feeding chickens, tending gardens, churning butter, and during the harvest they may even work in the fields. Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants*, 94-97.

¹⁷³ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 37.

an alien household, had to adjust from a land of a “glad, gay race, fond of talking and laughing” to almost complete solitude, making it wholly understandable why many Irish girls chose to get married and leave service as soon as they could. Spofford argues that when mistresses show no sense of understanding toward their domestics loneliness and estrangement, but simply “show a determination to get our money’s worth out of the machine,” they cannot hardly be surprised when the girl stops caring about the quality of her work. She wrote in depth of the problems the Irish servant girls faced on a daily basis in their new employment, as well as what tasks Irish domestics were typically engaged in:

Is it not really wonderful that girls of eighteen and twenty, day after day, without a thought of murmuring, rise with the dawn and go down in the lonely house to build the fires, --that, too, in a climate where the winter season is frightfully different from their own mild make-believe of winter, and where the iron is almost cold enough to blister the hand that touches it unguardedly, prepare the breakfast in loneliness, clear it away and eat of the scraps in loneliness, wash dishes, scour knives, clean silver, sweep, dust, scrub, cook, to say nothing of laundry-work or chamber-work; hear pleasant voices and gay laughter in the cheerful life of the parlors, and feel themselves shut off from it of course, not perhaps with the least wish to join it, but with its suggestion of scenes as pleasant to them; see the young ladies of the house, girls of their own age, enviably free and idle, well-dressed, going out and coming in at their pleasure with friends about them seldom at liberty themselves to run out or to sit down with their sewing while the sun shines, though they may usually do as they like with their evenings; go to sleep at last, when night comes, in the remotest and worst room, and possibly poorest bed, of the house, in order to get up in the morning and go through with the same tread-mill round month by month, year by year?¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 47-48.

The solution was for mistresses to take note of their servant's welfare, and those who did so would find themselves complaining the least of trouble in their kitchens.¹⁷⁵ Spofford also urged readers to remember the history of these women laboring for them now in order to inspire empathy. Yes, they may seem to waste your food, but that is because they recently had but little and they believed no one would notice a little wasted in a home where people are used to eating such a vast variety of food. The same goes for many household tasks. Insufficient sweep work is understandable when it is remembered that "her floors at home were earthen ones," and the amount of teacups she breaks make sense when it is remembered that she most likely "had done no more dainty work...than the farm-work of the fields."¹⁷⁶

Again, Spofford's work shows itself to be a document of the nineteenth-century, for though she truly wants American readers to understand the situation that their Irish domestics are coming from, she employs a brand of unconscious racism and ethnocentrism herself, in assuring readers that while they might feel despair at the lack of order in their house and how poorly their servants have cleaned their houses, they must ask themselves "if neatness and precision could be much cultivated in a place where the pigs and the children tumbled together, and the same roof covered both?"¹⁷⁷ Later, she writes that "the different nationality of the maid, her unlettered state, her strange habits of speech, her wild traditions...may make her seem something like a creature of another race, a rougher and more primitive race, nearer the earth."¹⁷⁸ This meant a confusion

¹⁷⁵ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 40-41.

¹⁷⁶ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 44.

¹⁷⁷ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 44-45.

¹⁷⁸ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 84-85. Sutherland, writing exactly one hundred years after Spofford, agrees with Spofford's argument that one of the fundamental problems in the service industry was that many employers did not understand that their servants "handicapped by rural or lower-class

among some Irish servants about the do's and don'ts of elaborate table settings, or later about operating modern conveniences such as a washing machine. This is reflected in an excerpt from the *Iowa State Bystander* on March 15, 1895 entitled "The Reason":

Caller—Why do you call your new maid "Japan," Mrs. Jones; isn't she Irish?

Mrs. J. — Oh, yes. She's Irish, and her real name is Mary Ann; but we think the other name more appropriate; she seems to have such a grudge against china, you know.¹⁷⁹

Domestic service subjected Irish immigrants to frequent ridicule and rebuke. The stereotype about "Bridget" being clumsy and arrogant became permanently attached to characterizations of Irish servants in the nineteenth-century as more Irish women arrived from abroad and took over the domestic service sector. These women spent long hours at the harshest and most difficult tasks, chores that no one else wanted to do, and were constantly reminded of their low position in society. But clearly, as evidenced by figure 2.1, the desperation for work must have outweighed the less attractive elements of domestic service.

Farm Work and Other Types of Employment for Irish Immigrant Women on the Iowa Frontier

Irish women did more than just participate in domestic service in nineteenth-century Iowa. Women's labor was vital in building and running farms on the frontier, a fact acknowledged by men who did not wish to stay single for long and by newspapers

American and European origins, were unaccustomed to "civilized ways." Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants*, 64.

¹⁷⁹ *The Iowa State Bystander*, "The Reason," March 15, 1895, located at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025186/1895-03-15/ed-1/seq-3.pdf>.

and advertisements which encouraged single women to migrate west with promises of hordes of single men in the marriage market. Single and married women were also employed in a variety of different wage-earning activities to be elaborated on in this section, evidence of the many occupations open to Irish women in Iowa that they could no longer find in the limited economy of post-Famine Ireland.

In “A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846; or, The Emigrant’s Guide, and State Directory,” Newhall wrote that “married persons are generally more comfortable, and succeed better, in a frontier country, than single men; for a wife and family, so far from being a burden to a western farmer, may always prove a source of pecuniary advantage in the domestic economy of his household, independently heightening the enjoyments of domestic happiness.”¹⁸⁰ Even Irish wives whose families owned large enough Iowa farms to hire domestic servants were not excused from all forms of labor. Many farm wives did not have the means to hire outside labor and had to do much of the work on the farm and in the home themselves. As in pre-Famine Ireland, women such as Anna McNamara were needed to help with the physical labor on the farm. She worked the fields near Prairieburg, Iowa with her husband John, letting her older children watch the younger children and stopping at the end of the rows to feed her baby.¹⁸¹ Her experience would have been representative of countless other young farm wives of this period.

Women were also needed to help populate the frontier state and to provide children who would grow up to continue their parents’ work on the farm. Thus, children

¹⁸⁰ J.B. Newhall, “A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846; Or, the Emigrant’s Guide, and State Directory; With A Description of the New Purchase: Embracing Much Practical Advice and Useful Information to Intending Emigrants. Also, the New State Constitution: Second Edition,” (Burlington: W.D. Skillman Publisher, 1846), 62.

¹⁸¹ H. M. Wahlert, *The McNamara’s of Northeast Iowa: A Compendium of Names and Family History* (Victoria, British Columbia: Trafford Publishing, 2005).

once again became economic assets to their families, similar to pre-Famine Ireland.¹⁸²

Mrs. Patrick Mullen of Cedar Township accomplished this in typical Irish fashion, bearing and rearing ten children, who in turn produced twenty-five grandchildren by the time of Mr. and Mrs. Patrick Mullen's death. Both Mr. and Mrs. Mullen were born in Ireland and migrated separately to Iowa, where Mr. Mullen worked at construction and married Mrs. Mullen in 1857. Mr. Mullen would ultimately own over 300 acres in Blackhawk County, all of which was worked by his sons.¹⁸³ The examples of Anna McNamara and Mrs. Mullen reinforce what was so important about Irish female labor in Iowa between 1840 and 1900: these settlers were absolutely vital for domesticating the wild land of untamed Iowa and populating it for the future, and economic and domestic duties often intertwined.

Farm wives who had to work alongside their servants or who did not own large enough farms to employ extra servants were responsible for a multitude of tasks on the farm and inside the home. Irish women who migrated with their husbands to Iowa and purchased land or started as domestic servants in Iowa and then married and started a farm on the fresh land saw their work strongly dictated by the extreme seasons characteristic of the Midwest, as did Irish domestics employed by farm families. In the winter, farm wives and their servants sewed and mended their family's clothes and helped with butchering. In spring, women typically had to hatch and raise chickens and plant gardens and were responsible for annual spring housekeeping chores. In the hot, humid summer months, women helped can vegetables and fruit, and store foods like

¹⁸² Weatherford, *Foreign and Female*, 271.

¹⁸³ "The Twilight of Life in Restful Happiness," located at Iowa State Historical Society Research Center, Iowa City.

apples and potatoes. Throughout the changing seasons, farm women and the domestics they employed were in charge of food preparation, child care, and housekeeping. Gardens, chickens, and children all required constant attention and reflect the ways economic and domestic duties overlapped for rural Iowa women, as well as the value of their labor in keeping their families fed and clothed.¹⁸⁴ Depending on the size of the farm, these tasks might be carried out by the work of (mostly) Irish servants. Or, married Irish women might find themselves responsible for all of the work or working alongside one or two hired domestic girls. The Irish immigrants who continued west were not freed from domestic duties they had left behind in Ireland, and many of their farm chores were similar to those women did before the famine when female family members were needed to help on the farm.

Besides service, Irish women in Iowa were sometimes listed in censuses as seamstresses, such as Sarah Campbell, or milliners, like Elizabeth More, both of Scott County.¹⁸⁵ In her memoirs on pioneer life in Palo Alto County, Etta May Lacey Crowder wrote that one of the industries practiced at home in those early days was the making of straw hats. The hats were made from “blue joint,” a “wild grass which then grew rather tall on the uplands and had a stem very much like that of wheat.” The straw was formed into a plait then sewn into shape with four or more strands together. The hats were fitted on heads as the women sewed them, the braid sewed “around and around until the required size was reached,” then turned around by drawing the braid tighter until reaching the desired height, and finally turned again by sewing a more loose braid to form the brim

¹⁸⁴ Schweider, “History of Iowa.”

¹⁸⁵ Davenport, Rock Island, Moline Directory 1858-1859, “Directory Entries for Irish in Iowa Researcher Surnames,” Scott Co., Iowa.

of the hat.¹⁸⁶ Clearly, this was skilled labor at its most painstaking, but the hats were also necessities for the farm hands out in the fields under the scorching summer sun.

The census reports of nineteenth-century Iowa life, which sometimes classify these pioneer farm women as “not gainfully employed,” ignore the large spectrum of jobs women did in fact do and all of the ways these women labored even though they were not paid. In the 1870 Dubuque County Census, 766 women who were either born in Ireland or whose mother or father were born in Ireland were listed as “Keeping House.”

According to the instructions given to census takers in 1870, women were to be classified in the census as “Keeping House” if they were keeping house for their families or themselves, without any other gainful occupation and without earning wages for their work.¹⁸⁷ These women held primary responsibility for tasks essential to running an Iowa farm and raising future generations of farmers. Ruth A. Gallagher argued that frontier women's tasks of cooking, spinning, weaving, sewing, milking, churning, making cheese, raising chickens, collecting herbs, nursing the sick, and rearing many children well was surely a sign that “the pioneer mother earned her living and left the country richer for her work.”¹⁸⁸

Below is a graph similar to figure 2.1 but expanded to give a fuller sense of the range of occupations beyond domestic service held by Irish women living in Dubuque County in 1870. Service is clearly the most heavily represented form of employment for women who worked for wages outside of their homes, but Irish women were also listed

¹⁸⁶ Etta May Lacey Crowder, “Musings on Clothing: Pioneer Life in Palo Alto County,” *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 46 (1948).

¹⁸⁷ Census Office, Department of the Interior, “Ninth Census of the United States, 1870. Instructions to Assistant Marshals,” 1870, 14.

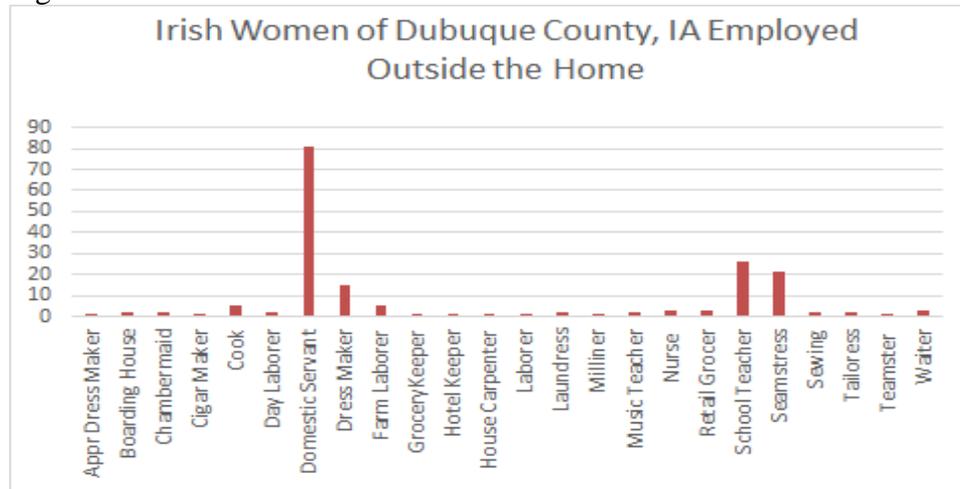
¹⁸⁸ Ruth A. Gallaher, “Around the Fireplace,” *The Iowa Pioneers* 49 (1968).

in the census as grocery keepers, cigar makers, school teachers and seamstresses, among other occupations. Out of the 1,365 women listed in this census collection (both working and non-working) fifteen worked as dressmakers, twenty-six were listed as teachers, and twenty-one were listed as seamstresses. This is a sharp turn from their experience in Ireland, which offered severely limited options for both married and unmarried Irish women and which had eliminated virtually all of the ways in which women might be accorded recognition and status based on their ability to help the family coffers. Married or widowed women on the Iowa frontier might run a boarding house for extra income. In 1860, Mrs. Lydia Ann Magill advertised in the *Daily Gazette* of Davenport that she had “handsomely fitted up No. 24, Third Street between Main and Brady,” and was prepared to provide rooms for a limited number of boarders and a few day boarders.¹⁸⁹ Taking in boarders was a socially acceptable way for Iowa women to earn extra cash, though at the price of extra work for themselves.¹⁹⁰ The full chart of employments for Irish immigrant women living in Dubuque County in 1870 is located at the end of this chapter (figure 2.3).

¹⁸⁹ *Daily Gazette Davenport*, Scott, Iowa Friday, April 13, 1860 located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/scott/apr1860clips.htm>.

¹⁹⁰ Glenda Riley, ““Not Gainfully Employed”: Women on the Iowa Frontier, 1833-1870,” *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (1980): 264.

Fig 2.2¹⁹¹



Teaching was the second most popular form of employment for Irish women employed outside the home in Dubuque County in 1870 according to figure 2.2. Thomas Morain, in his book *The Departure of Males from the Teaching Profession in Nineteenth-Century Iowa* finds that by 1862 large numbers of Iowa males were enlisting for the Civil War and as a result women were becoming the majority of teachers in Iowa schools.¹⁹² In 1869, there were 7, 615 female school teachers in the state of Iowa (as opposed to 4, 479 male teachers).¹⁹³ This suggests that similar to elsewhere in the nation during this period, teaching was seen as an acceptable profession for women. Even though it was a socially acceptable way to earn wages outside of the home, female school teachers did not earn as much as male teachers in 1869—female teachers on average earned \$6.79 per week, while male teachers on average earned \$9.24 per week.¹⁹⁴ Richard J. Jensen and Mark Friedberger, in their study “Education and Social Structure: An Historical Study of Iowa,

¹⁹¹ 1870 Dubuque County Census-Nativity Ireland, located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/irishcensus.htm>.

¹⁹² Sarah E. Montgomery, “Why Men Left: Reconsidering the Feminization of Teaching in the Nineteenth Century,” *American Educational History Journal* 36 (2009): 228.

¹⁹³ Calkin, *The Irish in Iowa*, 37.

¹⁹⁴ Calkin, *The Irish in Iowa*, 37.

1870-1930,” argue that in agricultural societies ambitions are geared towards accumulating “material capital” such as farm machinery and land, as opposed to investing in “human capital” such as the education of children.¹⁹⁵ Investing in education was a form of “deferred compensation” for farmers, who preferred the immediate benefits of purchasing livestock or the help provided by male sons on the farm. Women, according to Jensen and Friedberger, were more often allowed by farmer fathers to continue their education, because “educational credentials for women enabled them to get a job in the local district school, if not in the local village or trading center.”¹⁹⁶

Education throughout the nineteenth-century United States was seen as a natural extension of women’s roles as child rearers, and so teaching became an increasingly feminized profession.¹⁹⁷ Similar to domestic service, most female teachers were single and young, with the average age of the women in the 1870 Dubuque County Census at 21.8 years. Teaching was also similar to domestic service in that it often was a stage between girlhood and marriage, with most women teaching for only a few months up to a couple years, before leaving to marry and raise their own children.¹⁹⁸ Teaching was a difficult occupation on the frontier, where resources for the schoolroom were sometimes scarce and teachers often taught several levels of students in one room. Despite this, Glenda Riley finds that the advantages of teaching outweighed the problems and inconveniences. She writes that “they received a cash wage (albeit less than a man would receive), they could help support their family or contribute to a brother’s—sometimes a

¹⁹⁵ Richard J. Jensen and Mark Friedberger, “Education and Social Structure: An Historical Study of Iowa, 1870-1930,” published by the National Institute of Education, 13, located at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED125982.pdf>.

¹⁹⁶ Jensen and Friedberger, “Education and Social Structure,” 242-243.

¹⁹⁷ Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 248.

¹⁹⁸ Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 146.

sister's—education, they were free from the unceasing demands of farm work, they would expand their own horizons through books and new acquaintances, and they could help children become more effective adults in a rapidly changing world.”¹⁹⁹

The Significance of Frontier Women's Labor

Women's labor on the frontier has given rise to several feminist theories regarding the place of women in nineteenth-century rural American culture. American History historian Julie Roy Jeffrey updates the “civilizing” thesis in her work *Frontier Women: Civilizing the West? 1840-1880*.²⁰⁰ She argues that women accepted the Victorian ideology of a division of separate gender spheres and appropriated it for their activities, taking up a “civilizing mission” and running gender-appropriate churches, missions, and schools in the untamed countryside. Dorothy Gray argues for a “sexually egalitarian rural environment” in the West, where women were “scarce, valuable, and valued” for their skills and sexuality.²⁰¹ Gray argues that the Western frontier was a place where both genders had to pull their own weight in order to survive.²⁰² Caroline Bird, in her important work *Born Female: The High Cost of Keeping Women Down*, argues that frontier conditions “motivated men and women to similar or androgynous goals.”²⁰³

John Mack Faragher, in his insightful article “History from the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America,” expands on these views. He argues

¹⁹⁹ Riley, *Frontierswomen*, 148.

²⁰⁰ Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: “Civilizing” the West? 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

²⁰¹ Cited in John Mack Faragher, “History from the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America,” *American Quarterly* 33 (1981): 540, accessed October 6, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712802>.

²⁰² Dorothy Gray, *Women of the West* (Place: University of Nebraska Press, 1976).

²⁰³ Caroline Bird, *Born Female: The High Cost of Keeping Women Down* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1974).

that it is undeniable that women's work was essential to successful agriculture. From the colonial period through the nineteenth-century, Euro-American women were likely engaged in one-third to over one-half of the food production on family farms, as well as helping men with field work. Married women on the Iowa frontier, including married Irish women, would have been responsible not only for helping with the male chores of food production, but also responsible for food preparation, household chores, textile and clothing manufacturing, childcare, and all work obviously necessary to the reproduction of the farmstead."²⁰⁴

But Faragher differs from the other scholars of rural women's work in his conclusions about the significance of their work. He agrees that rural women and men were responsible for many of the same essential life-sustaining chores and that the skills women could bring into their marriage in their labor activities were vital. However, he argues that "despite the essential work done by Euro-American rural women there is little evidence to suggest that their husbands and sons granted equal power for equal work."²⁰⁵ This is distinct from the androgyny argument proposed by previous feminist scholars of the work of rural women which claimed that the rural work men and women did gave both genders equal value for equal labor. The nineteenth-century women working the Iowa frontier would have been unlikely to feel equal to their husbands, and the essential labor they did on the farms was expected without conferring any recognition or authority to them. Irish farmwives in Iowa were again responsible for many of the same activities for which they had been responsible in pre-Famine Ireland, and they should have been accorded due worth and value for these economic contributions. But the reality was that

²⁰⁴ Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out," 540.

²⁰⁵ Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out," 541.

emigration did not allow Irish women to escape from traditional domestic duties and so new labor opportunities in America did not entirely free them from deep-rooted patriarchal ideas about a woman's duty.

Irish immigrants Michael and Mary Brady arrived in Hamilton County, Iowa in 1876 to find largely uncultivated land. In 1890 the family settled on a farm in Blairsburg Township. The couple's biography reveals that Michael Brady got all of the credit for making the improvements and developing "excellent property," where he farmed, raised stock, and grew corn and oat crops which produced annually thirty to forty bushels an acre. Instead of acknowledging the labor his wife must have done to help the farm evolve from wild and uncultivated to a profitable concern, his biographer wrote in 1902 that "like many of the honored and honorable citizens who have come to America from foreign lands he is a self-made man, who by hard work and the assistance of his estimable wife has acquired a comfortable competence."²⁰⁶ Mary Brady was credited with assistance, but by no means given due recognition for her labor on the land or the fact that she most likely helped tame the land while also bearing and rearing their six children.

Even worse, Jeremiah Ryan of County Clare, Ireland, was given sole credit for the success of his farm in Black Hawk County, Iowa which by 1886 was 320 acres. His biographer wrote in 1886 that his success in agricultural pursuits was "due to his industrious habits and good business management," ignoring the fact that his wife Sarah managed to raise nine children while almost assuredly assisting with developing the land. This is especially notable since the couple married in 1857 and moved to their farm in

²⁰⁶ Author Unknown, *Biographical Record of Hamilton County, Iowa* (New York & Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1902) 338-339.

1867, and so it is likely that the couple would have had young children during the process of converting their land to a successful enterprise. The biographer wrote that the land when they first settled in Black Hawk County was all prairie, so it is very probable that Jeremiah would have needed help getting their farm running from his wife before he had the resources to hire outside labor.

In a rare case, Mary Glynn (maiden name) was credited in the biography of her husband, Michael Neyland (both of County Clare, Ireland), as being “the lady to whose counsel and active assistance Mr. Neylan owes not a little of his success.” Still, though, his cultivation of 160 acres in Clayton County, Iowa, is described as being a result of *his* “industrious and persevering” character, “pluck,” “undaunted energy,” and “indefatigable exertions.” A description of the chores on the farm and in the house that Mary would have contributed is noticeably missing from the description of how one hundred and sixty acres was cultivated into a well-improved farm in Clayton County.²⁰⁷

If their husbands passed away, women could be left entirely in charge of managing the farm. Such was the case of Irish immigrant Elizabeth Coogan, whose husband died in their home in Chickasaw County in 1893, leaving Elizabeth to “undergo the trials of managing the affairs of their farm” until her own death in 1905. Elizabeth was also mother to twelve children, and so is another example of the unpraised—yet extreme—labors of many Irish women in nineteenth-century Iowa, who had to balance two major responsibilities: farm work and childcare. At the same time, or in Elizabeth’s case, raising eight sons and four daughters, a clear indication of the unpraised extreme

²⁰⁷ Author Unknown, *Portrait and Biographical Record of Dubuque, Jones and Clayton Counties* (Chicago: Chapman Pub. Co., 1894) located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/clarebios.htm>.

labors of Irish women in nineteenth-century Iowa.²⁰⁸ These examples reinforce Faragher's argument that the sexual division of labor on the frontier was a "division of authority, prestige, and remuneration."²⁰⁹

Prior to the late nineteenth century, women were often forbidden access to the world outside home and church. Most wives were rarely able to take time off from their domestic duties. In addition, settlement patterns meant that it typically took too large of a block of time for women to visit other women and socialize. In contrast, men's responsibilities allowed them to lay down their plows every now and then and enjoy the public world of commerce and other men. Anna McNamara, for instance, even when she was finished with her work in the fields, would not have been released from her domestic responsibilities of childcare or housework. Irish immigrant Bridget Grace, who passed away in Davenport, was described in a biography primarily dedicated to her husband as someone who "became a devoted wife and mother and spared no effort in preparing her children for places of usefulness in society."²¹⁰ This reinforces the importance given to the responsibility of preparing children to be members of society and the extent to which this task was never-ending.

Despite the 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration of Rights and Sentiments and the emerging 1850s Women's Rights Movement, the second half of the nineteenth-century was still not a period that gave women credit for their labor, paid or unpaid, especially in the patriarchal farming structure of Iowa. The *Sioux City Daily Journal*, on June 15,

²⁰⁸ Author Unknown, "Coogan" in Antrim Obits, Oelwein, Iowa January 1905 located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/armaghobits.htm#coogan>.

²⁰⁹ Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out," 548.

²¹⁰ Harry E. Downer, *History of Davenport and Scott County Vol. II* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co. 1910) located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/clarebios.htm>.

1871, covered a speech delivered by Susan B. Anthony to the Academy of Music.

Summarizing the main points of her lecture, a journalist for the paper wrote about what Anthony had to say on women's conditions in the labor force. The journalist wrote that Anthony had argued that if slavery means being subject to the will of another, "this is woman's condition." The "ignorant, degraded, and besotted" man has an advantage over the "intellectual, refined, and cultivated woman" simply because he has the power of the ballot. Anthony argued that "women rarely succeed in bettering their condition, because, not having the ballot, they are not feared." Thus they do not join trade unions or organize strikes. In turning to women's unpaid domestic duties, she also argued that "as the unpaid labor of negroes in the South, previous to the war, degraded white labor, so the unpaid services of the married woman degrades the labor of the unmarried woman." A Midwestern farm wife in the nineteenth-century was a "helpmate" responsible for reproduction (labor and male heirs), production of table food and surplus dairy products to sell for cash. This productive labor did not confer much of any status on women, though there were times their supplemental earnings were crucial to the family's survival.²¹¹ Just the fact that women "helped" men in the fields more often than men "helped" women in the house was evidence of the higher priority given to the tasks men were responsible for than those for which women were responsible.²¹²

Anthony went on in her address to the people of Sioux City to argue that a woman is a "mere pauper" no matter how much her husband earns or how faithfully she attends to her domestic duties, and stated declaratively that "a woman who will enter into such a

²¹¹ Kirby, "Rural Culture," 590.

²¹² Nancy Grey Osterud, "Gender and the Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *Agricultural History* 67 (1993):22. Accessed September 5, 2015.

partnership is not worthy of respect,” and “every women is entitled to one half of her husband’s earnings, and should demand it.”²¹³ Women were *feme covert* according to the law, without civil, political, or property rights apart from their husbands, which meant that even though women did participate to important extents in shaping the terrain of the Iowa frontier, they were not accorded due status for the fruits of their labor.²¹⁴ This system could sometimes leave women such as Bridget McDermott vulnerable after the death of their husbands. McDermott left Ireland in 1843 and married her husband Daniel Higgins in 1856, both moving to Dyersville, Iowa to start a farm. But after her husband's death, Bridget had to work as a housekeeper because she had so little to live on for the fourteen years between his death and hers.²¹⁵

Religious Women’s Work

Despite these severe handicaps, some Irish women—notably the religious orders—endeavored to shape the Iowa landscape in other long-lasting ways. Mary Frances Clarke was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1803. She and four other religious women immigrated to Philadelphia to work with the poor and illiterate, and Clarke organized a group known as the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In 1843, the sisters migrated west to Dubuque, Iowa, where they founded St. Mary’s Academy, the first

²¹³ *Sioux City Daily Journal*, June 15, 1871.

²¹⁴ Writes Osterud: “A feminist analysis of the transition to capitalism encompasses both aspects of agrarian economy and society. On the production side, it investigates the relationship between the gender division of labor and distinctions between market-oriented and non-market-oriented production, asking whether men and women developed different relationships to the market as the farm operations for which they were responsible became integrated into the market at different times and along different paths. It also investigates whether men’s work and women’s work were assigned different types of value, or whether women’s work became devalued relative to that of men, through the transition to capitalism.” Osterud, “Gender and the Transition,” 17. Faragher, “History from the Inside-Out,” 549-550.

²¹⁵ Author Unknown, “Joynt Family Chronicles: Descendants of David Patrick Joynt, located at http://www.celticcousins.net/joynt/descendants_of_david_joynt.htm.

women's college in Iowa. After a fire in 1849, Clarke reestablished the college as Mount St. Joseph's Academy and College, known today as Clarke College, a four-year liberal arts college still affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. The Sisters of Charity were also responsible for the establishment of several elementary and secondary schools around Iowa, shaping the educational and religious character of Iowa in permanent ways.²¹⁶ This example highlights how capable nineteenth-century women were when not encumbered by men, children, housework and the additional chores inseparable from homesteading.

Unlike the Sisters of Charity, the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy was established in Ireland in 1831 and dedicated to "care of the poor, sick, and uneducated." In 1843, at the request of Bishop James O'Connor, the first Sisters of Mercy came to Pittsburgh to care for the poor in the United States. The Sisters traveled to Chicago in 1846 and from there in 1867 to DeWitt, Iowa, where they opened a school. With Sister Mary Borromeo Johnson leading the way, the Sisters, at the bequest of doctors, opened Mercy Hospital in Davenport, Iowa in 1868. Mercy Hospital was a "pioneer institution of its kind" in that area of the country. When it opened it was one of only two hospitals west of the Mississippi River (the other in St. Louis), and it immediately began to fill an urgent need. By 1931, the hospital had expanded to serve two hundred patients in the main hospital, and departments had been created to care for up to two hundred mentally afflicted patients at a time as well. Building on their work on Mercy Hospital, the Sisters of Mercy went on to establish and run two more hospitals in Iowa, as well as a junior college, an academy, several schools throughout the state, a seminary for boys, a home for working

²¹⁶ Iowa Commission on the Status of Women, "Iowa Women's Hall of Fame," August 25, 2007 located at http://publications.iowa.gov/3881/1/07_HOF_Book.pdf.

girls, a home for the aged, and training schools for nurses, with the original Sisters of Mercy from Ireland vital in the early days of such projects.²¹⁷

Nuns played a distinctive role in the shaping of nineteenth-century charitable institutions in the United States. Freed from the duties that come with marriage and child rearing, nuns had the time and resources to establish lasting institutions. Nuns also had a certain amount of authority and prestige in their communities usually not allowed to the female gender, and they often had more access to education and training.²¹⁸

Labor for Irish female immigrants in the United States meant more than simply the opportunity to earn an income. The work of Irish women signified an important change of their status in Irish and Irish-American society. Regardless of whether they engaged in factory work, domestic service, or farm work, the involvement of Irish women in wage-earning activities in the United States allowed them to become important economic contributors to their household economies (both their new families abroad and their old families in Ireland through remittances) in a way that had become impossible for most women living in Ireland after the Great Famine.

However, it is important to remember that even though Iowa provided opportunities which had disappeared for these women overseas, Irish immigrant women still did not receive due recognition for the extent of their labor on the nineteenth-century Iowa frontier. Many single Irish women employed as domestic servants in Iowa were given the chance to support themselves and be economically independent of a patriarchal

²¹⁷ Edgar Rubey Harlan, "Sisters of Mercy," located in *A Narrative History of the People of Iowa Vol III* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1931) 361-362, and Marlys Floyd, *Mercy Nurses: The Making of a Mercy Nurse* (Place Unknown: Xulon Press, 2009).

²¹⁸ Deirdre Moloney, "Who's Irish? Ethnic Identity and Recent Trends in Irish American History," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28 (2009): 101, accessed July 18, 2015, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/40543475>.

family unit, but upon marriage they were still expected to abide by traditional notions of women's duties and the subordinate position of women to men, especially evidenced in the lack of recognition given to the countless Irish immigrant women who helped turn untamed Iowa prairie into flourishing farms. Even so, the single Irish women in the United States were able to save up a large part of their wages to send back home as remittances, thus subsidizing the continued exodus of Irish immigrants, as well as supporting those who stayed behind, which made the Irish female labor force in the United States invaluable. The continuing migration chain financed by the women who came to the United States endlessly multiplied the labor force in the United States, as women sent home money that allowed more and more of their kin, both male and female, to arrive in the United States to work as servants, factory workers, nurses, nuns, teachers, farm-workers, and many other occupations still filled by Irish-American descendants today.²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Breda Gray. *Women and the Irish Diaspora* (New York: Routledge Press, 2004), 1.

Figure 2.3²²⁰

Occu- pation	Number of Irish Women Employed (in Dubuque Counties, 1870)
Appr Dress Maker	1
At Home	348
Boarding House	2
Chambermaid	2
Cigar Maker	1
Cook	5
Day Laborer	2
Domestic Servant	81
Dress Maker	15
Farm Laborer	5
GroceryKeeper	1
Hotel Keeper	1
House Carpenter	1
Keeping House	766
Laborer	1
Laundress	2
Milliner	1
Music Teacher	2
Nurse	3
Retail Grocer	3

²²⁰ 1870 Dubuque County Census-Nativity Ireland, located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/irishcensus.htm>.

School Teacher	26
Seamstresses	21
Sewing	2
Tailoress	2
Teamster	1
Waiter	3

Chapter Three: How the Irish Became White in the Landscape of Nineteenth-Century Iowa

Success can be classified as that quality which prompts the average individual to 'move up' as he enters a crowded street car. About the entrance, the crowd huddles together and the congestion is being gradually added to by the incoming passengers. Finally, someone gets aboard whose disposition and temperament is to 'move up' where there is more room and tho he bumps some of the passengers and gets jostled himself, he reaches the place where there is more room and a better atmosphere and really makes it more satisfactory for the crowd he passed on his way to comfort.

Pat Walsh, Davenport, Iowa, b. 1855-1924.²²¹

The Irish immigrants who made their way to the Hawkeye state were no strangers to ethnic ridicule and prejudice. Making it to Iowa meant that these were the immigrants who survived the years of the Great Potato Famine, horrible years that many Irish contemporaries and historians today believe could have been alleviated had the British viewed their Irish colonial subjects with more humanity. The Irish men and women who immigrated to the United States and then on to Iowa would not escape being cast as an inferior race. Initially, many American Protestants viewed the Irish race on the same plane as African-Americans. The Irish were not always considered the “white” ethnic group that they are today. Between 1840 and 1900 Irish men and women had to prove their “whiteness” to White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans. Iowa provided a place where those Irish immigrants “in love with or otherwise fated to land” could raise their socioeconomic fortunes and prestige. An important but overlooked factor in the process of bettering their social and economic status were the contributions of Irish women and

²²¹ *Davenport Democrat*, ““Always Room at the Top” The Motto of Pat Walsh, One of the Ablest of Davenport Builders,” Davenport, Scott, Iowa. June 20, 1924. Pat Walsh was born in Davenport, Iowa to parents who had very recently come from County Clare, Ireland. He began his wage-earning career at the age of eleven as a shingle packer and general errand boy. He would ultimately found the Walsh Construction Company which directed railroad works throughout the country, handling contracts worth millions.

their experiences, primarily their labor. Fewer Irish women than men continued their migration west, but those who did were important components in the homesteading process and in the achievements of the Irish and Irish-American ethnic cohort.

Most studies of Irish “whiteness” have centered on the East Coast and the experiences and efforts of men. One of the best known, Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White*, looks at the relationship between Irish and African-American men in the United States, mostly focusing on Irish feelings towards abolition and the labor competition between the two groups. David Roediger’s chapter “Irish-American Workers and White Racial Formation in the Antebellum United States,” in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, follows similar themes in examining the relationship between Irish-Americans and African-Americans. He traces how the Irish came to insist on their own whiteness. Catherine M. Eagan’s article, “‘White,’ If ‘Not Quite’: Irish Whiteness in the Nineteenth-Century Irish-American Novel,” takes a different approach and argues that Irish-American novels make it clear that “whiteness” was an identity to which Irish Americans felt entitled and purposefully and actively pursued. She also examines the ways that Irish-American novelists “asserted their white racial credentials” through fiction.²²² Taking more of an anthropological view of things, Bronwen Walter’s book *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place, and Irish Women* looks at notions of diaspora and assimilation to argue that the contribution of Irish women to domestic service “links them to key processes in western industrialisation,

²²² Catherine M. Eagan, “‘White,’ If ‘Not Quite’: Irish Whiteness in the Nineteenth-Century Irish-American Novel,” in *New Directions in Irish-American History*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

including constructions of white middle-class masculinity through the cult of domesticity, and the constructions of whiteness in both the United States and Britain.”²²³

This chapter builds off of the scholarship on whiteness to trace the ways that Irish immigrants and their offspring in Iowa climbed the socioeconomic levels of success. It will emphasize the role that women played. It explores the stereotypes and fears of the Irish that these immigrants had to endure. These include Nativism and opinions held by families who employed Irish domestics regarding their religion and morality. Much has been written about the nativism of American Protestants, but most historians focus on the problems Irish immigrants encountered on the East Coast. Very little has been written about anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiments on the frontier of Iowa. Although Ignatiev ignores the role of women in the process of Irish attaining “whiteness,” this chapter employs his argument that one of the primary ways the Irish were able to climb the ladder of success was through their labor.

This chapter first looks at the nativism experienced by the Irish in Iowa and progresses to examining the ways they resisted such beliefs. It looks at stories of Irish families who “made it,” having arrived off of famine ships almost penniless, and who passed away after having become proud owners of sometimes thousands of acres of land. While women are given particular emphasis, the achievements of Irishmen in Iowa have also never been sufficiently documented and will be discussed. Domestic service continues to be studied throughout this chapter, particularly the theme of the Irish “Bridget” whose work in Victorian American homes as a servant gave her ideas about what standard of living she desired, motivating her to leave service and transfer middle

²²³ Walter Bronwen, *Outsiders Inside: Whiteness, Place, and Irish Women* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

class values into her own home eventually. This chapter also looks at the development over the years of 1840-1900 of the labor experiences of Irish female immigrants and their daughters in Iowa. By looking primarily at newspaper articles and census records, we see the development of Irish-American girls moving away from domestic service positions by the end of the century—something other scholars have studied in more broad contexts, but which appear to hold true in Iowa as well.

This chapter is not a “whiteness” study per se. It does not seek to prove conclusively that Irish immigrants in Iowa were consciously attempting to separate themselves from African-Americans. Nor does it argue that Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century Iowa asserted their white racial identity as a way to claim the benefits associated with membership in the white racial group. This would be especially difficult in light of the low numbers of black men and women residing in Iowa in the nineteenth-century. Blacks were certainly there, but their numbers were not high enough to come to definitive conclusions on patterns.

This chapter does differ from previous scholarship on this subject. It discusses how the labor and experiences of female immigrants from Ireland in the context of the Iowa frontier is as historically important as men’s labor, religion, and language in discussions about how the Irish became white, as well as how the Irish worked to further the status of their ethnic group. It seeks to look at the contributions of Irish women and their immediate descendants to the rising wealth and achievement of Irish families in Iowa and the roles women played within their gender to further the status of the Irish race. Irish immigrant women in Iowa were consciously aware of the lower status given to their ethnic cohort, and their activities and decisions helped Irish immigrants to improve

the position of their race, whether or not they were consciously working in opposition to African-Americans.

Irish Encounters with Nativism

Homer Calkin, in his 1964 book, *The Irish in Iowa*, wrote that “On farm and in city, in every walk of life, the sturdy sons of Erin provided the brains and native ingenuity as well as the brawn and sinews that have made them true “Builders of the Hawkeye State.””²²⁴ The sons and daughters of Erin were an undeniably important presence in transforming Iowa from wild prairie territory into an economically efficient and bountiful state. Despite this, Irish immigrants in Iowa did not escape the prejudice and intense nativism that has been so well-documented in the histories of Irish-America.

Nativism took shape in the nineteenth-century United States in a variety of different forms. Roediger writes that “*low-browed* and *savage*, *groveling* and *bestial*, *lazy* and *wild*, *simian* and *sensual*” were some of the many adjectives used by native-born Americans to describe Catholic Irish in the antebellum period.²²⁵ Newspapers loved to report on Irish crimes and disturbances, notably furthering the stereotype of the Irish drunk.²²⁶ The Irish were viewed as persistently intoxicated members of an inferior race, a dispensable labor force perfect for the most dangerous jobs of the period.

American Protestants feared the growing dominance of the Catholic Church in the United States, which further encouraged prejudice and discrimination. Catholic immigration, mostly from Germany and Ireland, helped to make the Catholic Church the

²²⁴ Homer Calkin, *The Irish in Iowa* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1964), 83.

²²⁵ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 133-134.

²²⁶ Calkin, *The Irish in Iowa*.

largest religious denomination in the country by the 1840s. Many American Protestants feared such growth as a “threat to the future of the nation.”²²⁷ They believed the Catholic Church was an institution whose demand of absolute loyalty contradicted American ideals such as freedom and progress. As a result, fears of political “popery” and controversies over Catholic schools gave momentum to nativist passions, which would reach a pinnacle in the establishment of the nativist Know-Nothing Party.²²⁸

Such anti-immigrant sentiments made their way to the interior of the Midwest in the virgin state of Iowa in the nineteenth-century. Cheryl Herr’s book *Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: From Ireland to the American Midwest*, which has been mentioned, seeks to compare the regions of rural Ireland and Iowa. She makes a very insightful and interesting contribution to understanding the root of prejudices in Iowa and the ways in which nativist hatred of the Irish took different shape on the frontier than in Eastern seaport cities. Herr attributes prejudice and bias against Irish immigrants to the cultural consciousness of Midwesterners and especially early frontiersmen and women. She finds that between the victims of the Great Famine finding their way to Iowa and their descendants being dispossessed during the Great Depression, “the railroads were built, canals were created, the land was cleared, and production soared to meet old demands and create new ones; a thriving market economy established itself...” Herr argues that such evidence of progress captures the consciousness of a culture. The “emotional economy” that comes from booms and busts in an agricultural market create “utopian projections” that become expressed in the way societies self-represent

²²⁷ Sandra Frink, “Women, the Family, and the Fate of the Nation in American Anti-Catholic Narratives, 1830-1860,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18 (2009): 240, accessed October 6, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40663352>.

²²⁸ Frink, “Women, the Family, and the Fate of the Nation,” 240.

themselves. Thus, “projecting the heartland” has been the only “mass psychic defense possible” against a market which is often inconsistent and can leave those who are reliant upon it at a loss.²²⁹

Herr then proceeds to explain how this impacts Irish immigrants. As has been documented extensively by historians, by the 1850s nativists called for restrictions on immigration, believing that the values Protestants self-identified with of hard work, family, community, piety, and temperance were coming under attack. Herr argues that these ways of life were tied to the production needs of the transcontinental railroad system, and the full market economy that had emerged in the Midwest by the 1850s. Farmers in this economy “viewed themselves as natives following from east to west a receding frontier somehow synonymous with capitalist acumen and virtuous behavior.” Thus, the nineteenth-century flood of Irish Catholics into Iowa produced alarm from those who “increasingly saw themselves as the salt of the American soil” and viewed the immigrants as contrarian to their values.²³⁰ This was a key element in the construction of the regional myth of Iowa so widely believed even today. This myth was responsible for producing prejudice against anyone who was believed to act contrary to the supposedly pure and principled values of the Midwest.

Evidence of prejudice against Irish Catholic immigrants in Iowa is abundant. In 1866 *The Iowa State Register* published an article about the names of Iowa counties. The author had come to the conclusion that Mitchell County was the worst named of all the counties, for it was named “after the braggart Irishman, John Mitchell, who after being

²²⁹ Cheryl Herr, *Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: From Ireland to the American Midwest* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 82.

²³⁰ Herr, *Critical Regionalism*, 84.

kindly and even warmly received in this country, turned around and did what he could to fan the flames of sedition in the South.” The author went on to write that “If we lived in Mitchell County, we wouldn’t rest till the disgrace was wiped out and the country named after a decent man.”²³¹ Sometimes the prejudice was more anti-Catholic than anti-Irish, such as when a group of members of the Know-Nothing Party destroyed the first Catholic Church of Cascade, Iowa in 1848.²³² Another type of evidence of discrimination was the not uncommon practice of newly arrived Irish dropping the “O” or “Mc” from their names. This was described in an unidentified Iowan newspaper article in 1887 which talks about four Irish families—the O’Rourkes, O’Keefes, O’Connors, and O’Mahoneys, as well as McGuffins, who all dropped the O’s and Mc’s of their names when they crossed the Mississippi. It is hinted at in the article that this was because of the difficulties in finding employment Irish immigrants had found on the East Coast. Immigrants most likely believed that not being identified as Irish in their new lives in Iowa would help their employability.

Herr argues that Iowa was “unusually Caucasian” and so evidence of racial bias developed partly without color differences as clues. German and Irish immigrants “assumed rivalry as part of their ethnic origins and racialized one another on that basis.”²³³ This is blatantly apparent in an issue of the German-language newspaper *Der Demokrat* from Davenport, Iowa, where it was written: “Nobody is going to Lyons but the damned Dutch and Irish rabble, and let them go; they’re only fit for bait for catfish

²³¹ Calkin, *Irish in Iowa*, 86.

²³² Elaine J. Anderson, “Old World Iowans,” (Mason City: Klipto, 1949), located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/cascade.htm>.

²³³ Herr, *Critical Regionalism*, 63.

anyhow.”²³⁴ It is also evident in the case of an Irish citizen of Cascade County, who remarked about Garryowen that “There is no other race in there. That is a beautiful feature of the town!”²³⁵ Herr also finds a source of prejudice in the fact that in 1870, the Iowa Board of Immigration decided to encourage an increase in migration from Germany, Holland, and Scandinavia. This they succeeded in. In 1870 the Irish population was the second largest in Iowa, but by the census of 1940, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Dutch populations dominated in the ninety-nine Iowa counties.²³⁶ Susannah Ural Bruce, in her book on Irish-American volunteers in the Union Army, describes another example of outright discrimination towards the Irish. Bruce found that in 1861, Irishmen in Iowa were protesting that even though they had filled up the regiments with other Irish-Americans, field commands were being given out to non-Irish officers.²³⁷

There is also significant evidence pointing to discrimination in nineteenth-century Iowa towards specifically Irish female immigrants. In March of 1863, Irish-Americans in Dubuque, Iowa reported that Dubuque’s Ladies Aid Society, which was supposed to help provide supplies and care for sick and wounded soldiers, was refusing to help the wives of Irish Catholic Soldiers. The mostly Protestant organization declared that Irish Catholic widows “had best look to Catholics now for assistance.”²³⁸ While there were much bias against hiring Irish girls as domestic servants, as touched on in the previous chapter, that

²³⁴ *Der Demokrat*, (Davenport, Iowa) July 20, 1865, located at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87058145/1865-07-20/ed-1/seq-3.pdf>.

²³⁵ Anderson, “Old World Iowans,” <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/cascade.htm>.

²³⁶ Herr, *Critical Regionalism*, 29. It is not detailed in either Herr or the 1870 pamphlet created by the Board of Immigration to encourage foreign immigration to Iowa. Iowa wanted to recruit Europeans in order to help economic growth, and it is possible that the Irish were simply not a part of those targeted for recruitment.

²³⁷ Susannah Ural Bruce, *The Harp and the Eagle: Irish-American Volunteers and the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 86.

²³⁸ Bruce, *The Harp and the Eagle*, 214-215.

did not stop anyone from hiring them. It simply created an idealized myth of a previous “golden age” of native-born American girls working as servants. There was also an amusing though disparaging article written in the *Iowa State Bystander* in 1894 discussing the aesthetics of women's arms, and ranked the Irish female arm at the bottom and terming it “defective” because of being tainted by Irish blood.²³⁹

It is not clear whether the infamous and disputed “No Irish Need Apply” signs that adorned windows and newspaper ads in the nineteenth-century in order to discourage Irish immigrants from applying to open jobs were in Iowa, but they assuredly were in other cities.²⁴⁰ However, there is still evidence that both immigrants and American Protestants in Iowa were generally aware of job discrimination towards the Irish. *The Iowa Historical Record*, published in 1887, makes reference to the slogan in describing the benefits that could come from an intelligence office for indigenous Native American girls (similar to the ones for Irish girls that helped newly arrived immigrants find domestic service positions). The author of the *Record* argued that such an office would help Native American girls become capable of self-dependence instead of receiving government handouts. As a result such girls would prove “capable assistants, and the weary housekeeper would sigh a sigh of restful satisfaction, as she said to herself, now “No Irish need apply.”²⁴¹ The 1884 “*Iowa Normal Monthly: Volume 8*,” confirms that Iowans were aware of the existence of the discriminatory “No Irish Need Apply” phrase.

²³⁹ *Iowa State Bystander*, “A Talk About Arms,” September 28, 1894, located at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025186/1894-09-28/ed-1/seq-3.pdf>.

²⁴⁰ In 2002 Richard Jensen published an article entitled ““No Irish Need Apply”: A Myth of Victimization,” in which he claims that “No Irish Need Apply” signs were almost nonexistent and that the phrase comes largely from a song of the same name and has stuck due to cultural memory.. In August 2015, eighth grader Rebecca Fried found multiple examples in newspaper ads for different professions in cities across the nation (<http://www.irishcentral.com/roots/history/High-school-student-disproves-professors-theory-that-No-Irish-Need-Apply-signs-never-existed.html>).

²⁴¹ State Historical Society of Iowa, *Iowa Historical Record: Volumes I, II, and III* (Iowa City, 1887), 555.

In discussing the public schools of Utah the author wrote that the public schools of Zion were completely under the control of the Mormon Church and “no Irish need apply” for any teachers’ positions.²⁴² It is possible that some families, may have seen these signs on the East Coast and brought memories of them to Iowa so that people were aware that the Irish were often discriminated against in job searches, without hard evidence to the fact of that happening in Iowa.²⁴³

In spite of plenty of evidence proving that Iowan Protestants were prejudiced against the Irish, there is insufficient information to conclude decisively that such prejudices hindered Irish men and women from finding employment in the frontier state between 1840 and 1900. In 1870, females born in Ireland currently residing in Dubuque held eighty-one domestic service positions, twenty-six positions as school teachers, as well as being employed as day laborers, farm workers, chambermaids, seamstresses, dressmakers, laundresses, cooks, and waitresses. Irish men were listed in the 1870 Dubuque census as being employed as saloon keepers, marble cutters, carpenters, boot and shoe makers, farm hands, clerks, day laborers, and a variety of other skilled labor positions (though the majority are listed as either employed on farms or as day laborers). There was work that needed to be done, and even if the Irish were not anyone's first choice, it is not clear that Irish immigrants were generally denied employment in Iowa on the basis of their ethnicity.

²⁴² “The Iowa Normal Monthly, Volume Eight” 393.

²⁴³ This is what to James Patrick Condon, who saw the signs in Philadelphia where he first lived after his immigration, before moving on to Iowa. Mary Callista Hood-Ott, “Biography Sketch of James Patrick Condon,” located at <http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/IA-IRISH/2002-02/1013490825> .

The Liminality of Domestic Service: Part of the Family and Foreign “Other”

Though it is unclear the extent to which racial prejudice hampered female Irish domestic workers' employability in nineteenth-century Iowa, theirs was definitely an employment sector heavily impacted by anti-Irish and anti-Catholic biases. American Protestants mistrusted Catholicism, and many American mistresses worried about employing Catholic girls in their private homes and giving them unlimited access to their children. They were suspicious about Catholic sexual morality and Catholic practices, most notably celibacy and the confessional. Employers believed these practices transgressed what they thought were the proper gender roles for both men and women. In regards to the servant girls they employed, American Protestants were most concerned with the practice of the confessional because they believed the practice of celibate priests and innocent young women talking unsupervised behind closed doors was an invitation for seduction and the equivalent to illicit sexual intercourse. The idea that a single woman could be talking to a man about sex infuriated Protestants. Some families attempted to convert their Irish Catholic servants, and sometimes even fired them when the girls refused to join in family prayers.²⁴⁴

Employers also hated the amount of time that their servants' religious devotion occupied. They complained about the inconveniences caused by their servants' wanting every Sunday and Holy Day off. But they also worried about immorality when their servants skipped church.²⁴⁵ Other mistresses were uncomfortable with the idea of someone from another religion having such intimate access to their lives. They worried

²⁴⁴ Margaret Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget: Irish Immigrant Women in Domestic Service, 1840-1930* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 72.

²⁴⁵ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 73.

about their every moral mishap being seen as a reflection on the inadequacies of their Protestantism.

Employers of domestic servants, in addition to wanting to keep Catholicism at an arm's length from their families, harbored other anti-Irish prejudices that could have hampered Irish immigrant women's abilities to find employment in Iowa in the nineteenth-century. This of course mainly includes the "Bridget" stereotype discussed in the previous chapter. The stereotype of Irish servant girls developed from Irish girls coming from material circumstances that were relatively primitive compared to Victorian-American middle-class homes in the nineteenth-century. It was not from an ignorance or stupidity on the part of the Irish as a race.²⁴⁶

The 1881 publication of *The Servant Girl Question*, by Harriet Prescott Spofford, continues to shed light on some of these points of conflict between American mistresses and their Irish servants. Spofford expressed disdain when discussing the apparently habitual pattern of Irish girls leaving their place of service almost immediately after the mistress had fully trained them, to go work some place easier (this "unfaithfulness" was a component of the "servant problem" previously discussed).²⁴⁷ Spofford wrote that it took:

...a trial of patience and temper and industry, to take a person utterly unacquainted with everything connected with housework or cookery...and day by day and week by week and month by month to go through the routine of the whole round of duty with her, till the slow intelligence is trained, and then to receive notice of intended departure, and have it all to do over again with the next one.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 69.

²⁴⁷ Bronwen, *Outsiders Inside*, 54.

²⁴⁸ Harriet Prescott Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1881), 64-65.

Continuing, she wrote that training a girl who is freshly arrived on American soil “is oftentimes enough to wear out the nerve of Jael herself.”²⁴⁹ Spofford detailed how it is very difficult for mistresses to feel sympathy and compassion for exiles of Erin when they shattered her china with rough handling, cracked her engraved glass, burnt dinner to a crisp, paid no attention to any slight corrections given to them, and tried to get away with the least effort possible, all while getting paid fairly nice wages. And this in addition to “the occurrences of drunkenness and theft among certain individuals of the class of whom we are speaking.”²⁵⁰ The problems associated with “Bridget” were the subject of a number of articles and books, and Spofford’s complaints were just a small fraction of dissatisfactions which were most likely echoed around the country. As a result of these complaints, “No Irish Need Apply” advertisements and notices regarding Irish servants definitely existed to some extent in the Northeast (often in the form of clarifying that the employers wanted a Protestant girl). But it is unclear to what extent they appeared in the Midwest. The eighty-one domestic service positions filled by Irish immigrant women just in Dubuque in 1870 suggest that although employers may not have wanted Irish girls, the Irish were available, and employers had no choice but to resign themselves to this fact.

Issues with “Whiteness” Studies

Ignatiev, in *How the Irish Became White*, argues that the white race is composed of those who share in the privileges of white skin in the dominant white society. He writes that “its most wretched members share a status higher, in certain respects, than that

²⁴⁹ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 65. Jael was a biblical heroine.

²⁵⁰ Spofford, *The Servant Girl Question*, 66-67.

of the most exalted persons excluded from it.”²⁵¹ Ignatiev works to answer the question of how the Catholic Irish, an oppressed racial group in Ireland, became part of the oppressing race in the United States. He does this by studying immigrant assimilation and the formation of an American working class.²⁵² Ignatiev claims that the Irish immigrants who made their way to the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries fled oppression and material conditions imposed on them by the British, which made their standards of living comparable to those of nineteenth-century American slaves. They entered the United States most likely never having seen a person of color, but soon adapted to a society in which skin color was of the utmost importance for determining social position.²⁵³ Ignatiev argues that Irish immigrants made active choices from among the available alternatives to secure an advantage in a competitive society. Through their labor, Irish immigrants separated themselves from African-Americans and as a result were given the opportunities to compete for jobs in all spheres, to be citizens of a democratic republic, to elect and be elected, to live wherever they could afford, and to spend their new money however they wished.²⁵⁴

For a book that claims to be an attempt at a collective biography of two million people, Ignatiev does an embarrassingly insufficient job at writing anything that might pertain to the biography of fifty percent of those two million people—female Irish immigrants.²⁵⁵ In a book of predominantly case studies, female characters are mentioned

²⁵¹ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1.

²⁵² Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 1.

²⁵³ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* 2. Roediger also writes that “There was some noting of regional color differences in Ireland though most residents had seen no one of African descent. Ireland probably shared in the long standing Western European tradition of associating blackness with evil. There is some evidence of folk belief that the devil could turn people black, or turn people inside-out, thus making them black.” Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 138.

²⁵⁴ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 3.

²⁵⁵ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 178.

only twice in the entire index compendium of names, and both names are of abolitionists, not of Irish women. The largest section of his book which could pertain to the female gender is the three pages he devotes to the textile industry of Philadelphia County, an industry in which women and children were the majority of loom tenders and men were concentrated in the skilled positions.²⁵⁶ But instead of discussing women's roles in this industry, he concentrates on the reasoning of textile factory owners in hiring virtually only immigrant labor. While this is explainable due to the fact that it was not just women working in these textile factories, it means that Ignatiev fails to take advantage of any chance he had to look at the labor of Irish women and how Irish female immigrants in the United States in the nineteenth-century helped their ethnic cohort “become white.”

It is difficult to draw sufficient conclusions about relations between races in nineteenth-century Iowa because frontier Iowa did not have a large black population. Nevertheless there is still evidence that comparisons were in fact drawn between the two races. In one of the few direct comparisons of black and Irish groups in Iowa in the nineteenth-century, an anonymous speaker is quoted in an 1896 article of *The Iowa State Bystander* as saying “It is no longer true that an Irishman, if he behaves himself, is as good as a colored citizen.”²⁵⁷ The majority of blacks who migrated to Iowa during the late nineteenth century, according to Dorothy Schweider’s “History of Iowa,” were coal miners, but unfortunately in the early years were often hired as strike breakers.²⁵⁸

What is absent from Ignatiev’s work and Roediger's broader “whiteness” study is any significant analysis of how gender influenced racial constructions of identity,

²⁵⁶ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 113-115.

²⁵⁷ *The Iowa State Bystander*, Des Moines, Iowa, Friday, January 10, 1896, located at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025186/1896-01-10/ed-1/seq-1.pdf>.

²⁵⁸ Dorothy Schweider, “History of Iowa.”

particularly the different economic roles of the male and female genders.²⁵⁹ The labor patterns of Irish immigrant women were truly distinct from other female immigrant cohorts and from native-born white women, in both Iowa and the nation as a whole. These whiteness studies as well as labor history studies focus on areas of labor which are either male-dominated or sometimes even exclusively male.²⁶⁰ They ignore the real and notable presence of Irish immigrant women in industries such as domestic service, or the significance of economic contributions made by married Irish women that decisively helped a family's fortunes. Women were a huge part of the Irish labor force and so the work that they did deserves to be considered as helping the socioeconomic status and class standing of the Irish.

Beyond the work of Irish women in Iowa in the nineteenth-century it is important to note as well the influence of religion and language in helping the Irish climb the rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. This has been noted by historians with regard to immigrants on the East Coast but has not been studied in the context of Iowa. Catholics were encouraged to settle in Iowa almost as soon as white people began to populate the area. Dubuque, already noted as the most heavily Irish populated area of the state, was the center of Catholicism in Iowa and where Catholics would establish their first diocese.²⁶¹ On January 14, 1841, one of the first settlers of Dubuque, Charles Corkery, wrote a letter to the Philadelphia *Catholic Herald* urging the settlement of Irish Catholics in Iowa: "My sole desire is to direct the attention of Catholics (Irish Catholics more particularly) to the

²⁵⁹ Deirdre Moloney, "Who's Irish? Ethnic Identity and Recent Trends in Irish American History," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28 (2009): 105, accessed July 18, 2015 located at <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/40543475>.

²⁶⁰ Moloney, "Who's Irish?" 105.

²⁶¹ Schweider, *History of Iowa*.

country little known, and less appreciated in the East...many able and respectable writers (travelers and others)...unite in giving Iowa the happy cognomen of “the garden of America,” The Eldorado of the West...”²⁶² Bishop Loras, the leading Catholic figure of Iowa, also encouraged the migration of Irish Catholic settlers to Iowa, writing in 1854: “Let good emigrants come in haste to the west of Iowa...They will soon make whole Catholic settlements.”²⁶³ Bishop Loras helped establish Catholic churches all over Iowa as well as two Catholic educational institutions, Clarke College and Loras College, both in Dubuque.²⁶⁴

The Catholic Church was an important institution for helping Irish immigrants improve their status in the nineteenth-century. At the same time as American Protestants feared Catholicism for this very reason, having the backing of the largest religious denomination in the United States helped Irish immigrants obtain positions of power. The work of religious men and women such as Bishop Loras or the Sisters of Mercy (whose work was looked at in chapter two) helped immigrants and their children receive an education, an undeniably important tool for success. The Catholic Church also helped affirm the “whiteness” of Irish immigrants in being a large institution associated almost completely with white Catholics (typically of Irish, French, or German descent). This was a powerful structure, which blacks were largely not a part of, and one which no doubt helped Irish immigrants, in Iowa and the rest of the United States, distance themselves from any comparisons between them and the black race.

²⁶² Calkin, *The Irish in Iowa*, 43.

²⁶³ Calkin, *The Irish in Iowa*, 44.

²⁶⁴ Schweider, *History of Iowa*.

Speaking English was also vital in helping the Irish immigrants succeed in nineteenth-century Iowa. As has been noted, the German immigrants were even more prevalent in Iowa than Irish immigrants. But the experience, especially of German immigrant women, was remarkably different from that of Irish women because of a language barrier. Speaking English made it easier for Irish immigrants to send their children to school and made them more employable and more easily able to assimilate.

Nineteenth-century Iowa was a remarkable landscape for former Irish peasants seeking to start a new, hopefully improved, life for themselves after escaping the Potato Famine or the dismal conditions of post-Famine Ireland. It was a fresh, raw, and bountiful landscape that was in need of populating and settling at the exact moment that Irish immigrants needed somewhere to go. This was especially true for those who realized the limits of life in the cities of the East Coast. Biographies and obituaries of Irish families who ended their lives in Iowa are absolutely replete with examples of Irish men and women who “made it” in Iowa. Life on the frontier was harsh and certainly not for everybody, as the many cases of suicides noted in County Histories and newspapers makes clear, but for those who persevered and perhaps had a little Irish luck as well, the Iowa frontier was a place where an immigrant could go from being almost penniless, to truly achieving the promise of Iowa author Jane Smiley’s book: *A Thousand Acres*.

Many categories of prejudice towards Irish immigrants have already been noted. Farming practices were another. Communities were worried about the arrival of supposedly wasteful and careless Irish immigrants. Before the Irish Land Act of 1881, land agents in Ireland would raise the rent on plots when farmers seem to be prospering on lands which they did not own but “had the foolish temerity to improve.” So as a form

of self-defense, Irish farmers had pulled back on their improvements and made conscious decisions to have their land plots look like they were in disarray and disuse, so that their rents would not be raised. Thus, it was circumstance, not any characteristic trait of the Irish, which led Irish farms to be unkempt and inefficient. But Midwestern communities in the nineteenth-century could not possibly understand this, and simply feared that Irish immigrants would continue the same practices on their plots of Iowan land. This contributed to the prejudice against the Irish in Iowa as well as the disinclination towards having Irish neighbors. But Herr found that once Irish immigrants were installed in the prosperous Midwest, they almost immediately figured out how to be efficient and improve their farms. Herr writes that:

Tracing the emigrant from Ireland, where she was downtrodden and reduced, through the various stages of westward movement that characterized the restless search for better, more improvable land highlights the role of material conditions in composing supposed national traits. When discriminatory practices and their consequences were escaped, so too were the negative features so often taken to be the indelible signs of the Irish national character.²⁶⁵

The examples of this are widespread, as we have seen in examples in the first two chapters. A few Irish prospered so much in the early years in Dubuque County that by 1850, their property value was more than one-third of Dubuque County's total value, even though the Irish were less than one-fourth of the county's population.²⁶⁶ Thomas Norris Jr., was born in County Cork, Ireland in 1851 and had emigrated to the United States when he learned of the better opportunities available. By 1875-6, he made his first land purchase of two hundred and seventy acres in Denison Township, Iowa. There he

²⁶⁵ Herr, *Critical Regionalism*, 37-38.

²⁶⁶ Lyn Jerde, "The Irish of Dubuque, Iowa" *Irish-American Magazine*, 72 located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/dubuque.htm>.

established a farm which his biographer recorded as “one of the most valuable pieces of property in Denison township, having all the most modern improvements.”²⁶⁷ John Doyle also emigrated from County Cork in 1850. By 1882 Doyle owned six hundred and forty acres of land in Scott County, Iowa, as well as serving as justice of the peace and trustee of his township.²⁶⁸ Coming from County Kerry, a rural country in Western Ireland which was one of the hardest hit areas during the famine years, James Hickson and his wife by 1879 ran a stock farm of over 700 acres in Jackson County, Iowa, as well as lived in a three-story house of “commodious proportions.”²⁶⁹

A remarkable “American Dream” success story was that of James Flynn and his wife Julia Buckley Flynn. He was born in County Kerry, Ireland in 1827. He had to enter the work world to help himself and his parents survive at only nine years old. It is not recorded what kind of work he did, but it is listed that he made a mere 72 cents for three months’ work, and he never made more than \$24 a year. He came to the United States in 1856, originally settling in Brooklyn but moving on to Delaware County, Iowa after a year. He first worked at loading cord wood for 75 cents per day. Then he hired himself out to a few men, presumably as a day laborer over the course of about fifteen months. Next he worked in a livery stable, as a grader on a railroad, as someone who burned lime for the railroad, and he continued to spend the next several years working in a variety of different occupations. Flynn then rented and farmed land in Jones County until 1868 when he traded eighty acres of land in Jones County for 120 acres of land in Pottawattamie County. At the time that *The History of Pottawattamie County* was

²⁶⁷ F.W. Meyers, *History of Crawford County, Iowa...* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1911).

²⁶⁸ Author Unknown, *From History of Scott County, Iowa* (Chicago: Interstate Publishing Company, 1882).

²⁶⁹ Author Unknown, *History of Pottawattamie County, Iowa 1882...* (Chicago: O.L. Baskin & Co., 1883).

published in 1883, Flynn owned a remarkable 560 acres, 300 of which was under cultivation. In 1859 he married Julia Buckley, born in County Cork, Ireland in 1835. Mrs. Flynn was also nine when she entered the wage earning world, first being hired out by an unrelated woman, then by her uncle. At around thirteen years she went to London, where she worked for a private family for five years. For the first three years of this Buckley received only one shilling a month, and the last two she earned one shilling and six pence. But she was able to save enough off of her meager salary to come to America. Upon arrival in the United States she first worked for a private family in Illinois for three years, earning \$1.50 a week the first year and \$2 a week for the next two. Then she came to Jones County, Iowa where she worked in a hotel for seven months at \$2 per week. Here in Jones County she met her husband, James Flynn, and as noted above, the married couple bought land in Pottawattamie County that eventually grew into 560 acres. Both husband and wife had truly worked their way up from the bottom. In a matter of years they ran a successful grain and stock farming operation. Each one of these stories represents someone who put an immense amount of effort into land improvement.

Ignatiev and Roediger missed an important opportunity in their works. Starting with the single female Irish immigrant newly arrived to Iowa and progressing through her later role as a wife and mother, Irish immigrant women in Iowa played an absolutely invaluable role in affecting the social and economic status of the Irish race. The Irish immigrant women who made the journey west were in high demand as both servants and wives, and newspapers urged hungry and unemployed girls on the East Coast to travel to the Midwest. Irish immigrant women made up a significant proportion of the overall Iowan labor force, Iowa Irish labor force, and the unskilled labor force.

Observations about Irish female immigrant participation in domestic service is especially noteworthy because of the heavier involvement of this particular cohort (which means that the conclusions drawn exclude general patterns amongst ethnic cohorts in the nineteenth-century). As discussed, Irish female immigrants often travelled alone and were expected to find work for themselves upon arrival. In contrast, in other groups such as Italians, men emigrated alone at first and were later joined by wives travelling as a family and few women were even allowed to work outside the home. Walter argues that when women from other European countries did enter service, “the different conditions in which they worked meant that they occupied more marginal positions in public perception.” For example, German women tended to work for German employers and to “remain within the ethnic ghetto.” Swedish women were rarely employed as domestics and when they were they were geographically concentrated.²⁷⁰

Domestic Service as an Avenue for Becoming White

Domestic service provides a rich lens through which to study relations between Irish immigrant women and black women. Even if it took time for Irish immigrants to solidify the benefits of white skin privilege, a comparison of their experience to the experiences of African-Americans must proceed cautiously. Still, there are similarities to be drawn between the Irish and black participation in domestic service. Both groups entered service at a time when their own poverty and need overlapped with a growing demand for servants. Both groups were regarded as “natural” servants fit for such work.

²⁷⁰ Walter, *Outsiders Inside*, 55.

Both stayed in service for long periods of time. Both used their incomes to help their families. And both also worked to improve their labor conditions.²⁷¹

Cultural and Social Historian April Schultz, in her article “The Black Mammy and the Irish Bridget: Domestic Service and the Representation of Race, 1830-1930,” argues that the racial proximity of the Irish to their employers was an uncomfortable reminder of the contradiction between service and republican values of freedom from dependency.²⁷² This explains the characterization of the Irish Bridget stereotype as not-quite-white, done in an apparent effort of employers to distance themselves from physical association with their employees. Because a prerequisite of republican citizenship was not being mistaken for anything like a slave, the Irish would have to “prove their fitness for self-government as measured by their own distance from the “degrading” position of black dependency.”²⁷³ This would mean reconciling involvement in domestic service with retreating from association with black domestics, with whom they otherwise may have been able to bond over the common struggle of working in someone else’s home.

Many historians of Irish women's involvement in domestic service have looked at evidence that suggests that Irish immigrant women did indeed purposely distance themselves from blacks in service, a powerful argument which Ignatiev conspicuously does not reference in his own work. Dudden argues that this de facto displacement may have occurred in service because co-workers had to eat and sleep in the same room as well as work together. When immigrants started to flood the ranks of domestic servants

²⁷¹ April Schultz, “The Black Mammy and the Irish Bridget: Domestic Service and the Representation of Race, 1830-1930,” *Eire-Ireland* 48 (2013): 180-181, accessed October 6, 2015, DOI: 10.1353/eir.2013.0022.

²⁷² Schultz, “The Black Mammy and the Irish Bridget,” 177-180.

²⁷³ Schultz, “The Black Mammy and the Irish Bridget,” 182.

white immigrant servants began to outnumber black servants (though female black employment did remain concentrated in domestic service). Writes Dudden: “the employer who wished to take the line of least resistance would simply hire an all-white staff.”²⁷⁴

There were often tensions between Irish and black domestics, such as the case drawn up in the 1871 Scott County, Iowa Crime Files regarding “a large strapping negro woman” who worked as a servant for a family in Milan, Iowa, and who was accused of stealing the savings of a white servant girl who worked for the same family.²⁷⁵ When white domestics refused to work alongside black domestics, Dudden believes that this redoubled the isolation of black domestics, relegating them to live-out positions or to solitary maid-of-all-work assignments.²⁷⁶ But when immigrant domestics began to turn away from domestic service towards the end of the century, newspapers such as the *Iowa State Register* began to contemplate a movement “to import colored girls from the south” to take the vacant positions left by immigrant domestics.

Concluding that many Irish immigrants worked as domestic servants in Iowa is easily supported by historical data. But making conclusions about the effect that domestic service had on the immigrants is much harder. Very few sources describing domestic service from the inside exist. Most servants very likely either did not have the means or the time to write diaries or send letters. They may not have thought that their written

²⁷⁴ Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 64.

²⁷⁵ Scott County Iowa Crime Files, “A Colored Thief,” June 10, 1872, contributed by Cathy Labath located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/scott/crimeno21872.htm>.

²⁷⁶ Dudden, *Serving Women*, 224.

memories were worth saving or could not possibly have imagined how much people would be interested in their stories a century later.

Despite these difficulties, Irish women's involvement in domestic service is a rich source for studying the contributions of Irish working women to the Irish "becoming white." Historians of female Irish immigrants agree that domestic service was an assimilating experience for the Irish and smoothed their climb into the American middle class. They have argued that domestic service offered immigrants a close and intimate look at what middle-class life looked like and how Americans lived. Domestic servants learned the manners of the middle class in their experiences in American households, and service prepared Irish immigrant women for marriage and family life. It was a type of educational experience in which immigrants learned how to run a household and take care of their families.²⁷⁷ Doris Weatherford, in her book *Foreign and Female: Immigrant Women in America, 1840-1930*, argues that getting inside an American home is one of the fastest ways to learn about a country, and so there was an unsurprising correlation between rapid acculturation and those groups in which women adopted domestic service work.²⁷⁸ Once Irish immigrants left service to marry and begin their own households, they could transfer the middle-class norms that they had picked up onto their new homes and families in ways that immigrant women employed in factories could not.

Irish domestics learned ideas in American middle-class homes about the kind of luxuries and extravagances and other signs of wealth and achievement that they would

²⁷⁷ Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 151.

²⁷⁸ Weatherford, *Foreign and Female: Immigrant Women in America, 1840-1930* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1995), 248.

want in their own homes one day.²⁷⁹ Historians have found that employers sometimes were made nervous by their domestics' taste for affluence, especially when they used extra earnings to buy fashionable clothes which gave them a sense of equality with their employers. Daniel Sutherland argues that servant's fancy for nice clothing threatened the social positions of their employers. This was because, in the minds of well-off Protestant American employers, "to have kitchen maids dressing like a banker's wife diluted every vestige of middle-class respectability and prestige."²⁸⁰

In an article discussing the transition of Irish immigrants from "greenhorn" to "lace curtain" as represented in comic culture, William H.A. Williams finds that Irish women in America often had more opportunities than Irish men to understand the role of status in American society. This was because of how many of the young and single female women "had ample occasion to observe and learn the manners and mores of successful Yankees" through their labor opportunities, such as in service or hotel work.²⁸¹ He argues that as some Irish immigrant women became white-collar workers towards the end of the century (mostly teachers and nurses), these women had developed a better sense of middle-class lifestyles, which went hand in hand with their economic independence prior to marriage. Williams concludes that this experience may have given Irish immigrant women a good sense of money management and enhanced their status within the family.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ Lynch-Brennan argues that pianos and parlors were symbols of respectability that were iconic of Irish homes in the United States. Lynch-Brennan, *The Irish Bridget*, 154.

²⁸⁰ Sutherland, *Americans and their Servants*, 30.

²⁸¹ William H. A. Williams, "Green Again: Irish-American Lace-Curtain Satire," *New Hibernia Review* 6 (2002): 22, accessed August 4, 2015. <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/20557792>.

²⁸² Williams, "Green Again," 22.

Good servants were expected to accept the role of humble subordinates. Servants were not regarded as equals since the very nature of their occupation was to perform the duties that employers disdained to do themselves. As frustrating as servants who did not perform their tasks with the elegance and attention to detail that employers wished for, much was forgiven if they were obedient, submissive, and smiling.²⁸³ Andrew Urban argues that efforts of European men and women to “become white” took different shapes. He argues that if we accept the argument posed by Ignatiev and Roediger that Irish men were conscious of the benefits of whiteness and used various tools to reach that end, then Irish women “*likewise understood what was at stake in their racialisation*” (emphasis added).²⁸⁴ While on the one hand meeting the demands of their middle-class Protestant employers may have improved Irish women’s relationships with middle-class Anglo-Americans, “wilful subservience was simultaneously seen as a distinctly un-American quality and a characteristic that defined non-white populations.”

We have looked at the problem that mistresses faced of training their Irish servants just to see them leave. This is an example of Irish women consciously learning from their experience and “becoming white.” The United States places a heavy value on personal independence, and once the Irish servant girl understands this, she becomes unfit for servile behavior in domestic service work, thus causing a rift between herself and her American employer. This rift develops at the same time as she demonstrates valued “American” traits.²⁸⁵ Urban argues that all of the habits of “Bridget” discussed in the second chapter, which led to the stereotype of the unruly and wild “Bridget,” is proof of

²⁸³ Sutherland, *Americans and their Servants*, 35-37.

²⁸⁴ Andrew Urban, “Irish Domestic servants, ‘Bidddy,’ and Rebellion in the American Home, 1850-1900,” *Gender & History* [Oxford], 21 (2009), 266.

²⁸⁵ Urban, “Irish Domestic Servants,” 278.

Irish servants demonstrating that they were conscious of their profession's degraded status in the United States.²⁸⁶ Irish immigrant women took advantage of the opportunities of domestic service to have somewhere safe to live, earn a living while not having to pay room or board, and to acquire an educational experience, but they consciously attached a different meaning to the degraded status of their labor. This is especially apparent in two features of domestic service in the nineteenth century: the servant hierarchy and the tendency for Irish immigrants who were employed as single women in domestic service to keep their Irish-American daughters out of the occupation towards the end of the nineteenth-century.

Domestic service, unlike most other unskilled labor positions, contains within it a class system and hierarchy. This meant that even this otherwise stigmatized and lowly occupation taught habits of competition and rising above your peers—important components of education for success in capitalist America. Once inside a home, servants were arranged in an occupational hierarchy, which was essential in homes with multiple servants so that there was a chain of command.²⁸⁷ Cooks were typically at the top, with girls assigned to laundry at the bottom. Servants also ranked themselves according to race, nativity, employer status, and personal background. Sutherland argues this organization was even more decisive than the hierarchy based on occupation in determining personal relationships among servants, such as among black and Irish domestics.

Servants recognized the difference between old and new wealth, and sometimes they were proud to identify themselves with the family they worked for. This is another

²⁸⁶ Urban, "Irish Domestic Servants," 281.

²⁸⁷ Sutherland, *Americans and their Servants*, 83.

example of the education domestics received in service: that it was important in America to show that someone was your social inferior. Sutherland argues that “just as the upper classes looked down their noses at the lower classes, so butlers ignored chambermaids, native-white servants scorned immigrants, and immigrants despised negroes...”²⁸⁸

Movement Away From Service

It did not take very long for servant girls to adapt to the quest for betterment that American capitalism espouses. By the last two decades of the nineteenth-century servant girls in Iowa, rejecting the submissive character that their employers wanted, were agitating for better wages as well as leaving service altogether. This was indicative of how Irish immigrant women used their influence in the domestic service industry to learn how to be successful and “become white.” Already in 1871, the *Sioux City Daily Journal* reported that Dubuque servant girls were striking for increases in their wages and in the majority of cases were obtaining an increase of \$2.00.²⁸⁹ An 1890 issue of the Fort Dodge *Northwest Chronicle* wrote that in all parts of Fort Dodge girls were demanding for increases in their wages and when their demands were refused, the girls were quitting.²⁹⁰

This situation was made even more problematic by the fact that it had become, according to one Iowa newspaper, “impossible to secure another girl unless the advance demanded by the girls (sic) quitting is granted to the new girl.”²⁹¹ The *Des Moines Daily News* reported in 1899 that a servant girl strike was being threatened at Cherokee and all

²⁸⁸ Sutherland, *Americans and their Servants*, 87.

²⁸⁹ *Sioux City Daily Journal*, August 23, 1871.

²⁹⁰ *Northwest Chronicle* (Fort Dodge), July 23, 1890.

²⁹¹ *Northwest Chronicle* (Fort Dodge), July 23, 1890.

the female help were threatening to move unless their wages were increased (it also noted that the city was “seriously discussing the deportation of the agitator”).²⁹² Another article in Fort Dodge’s *Northwest Chronicle* described how the servant girls of Fort Dodge were binding together for protection and demanding higher wages according to their own scale.²⁹³ In Sioux City a servant girls’ protective association was formed, which included nearly every domestic employed in the city. The protective organization held secret meetings, required members to give reports on the treatment they received from the families where they work, and forbid members from seeking employment at houses on the society’s blacklist. In return the association helped find employment for unemployed servant girls, insured them good treatment from their employers, and helped servants demand regular payments of their wages from employers.²⁹⁴ The *Iowa State Register* reported in 1877 that a secret organization in the style of “trades-unions” had been formed in Dubuque as well.²⁹⁵ Clearly domestic servants were by no means passively accepting of the fate of their occupation, and strove as early as the 1870s to raise not only their individual wages, but the status of the service industry as a whole.

Once Irish immigrant women escaped domestic service and began their own families, they made it clear that they understood the degraded nature of service and wished to separate the association of their race with the occupation. One way in which Irish women helped to raise the socioeconomic class status of their ethnic group was in keeping their daughters far away from employment in the domestic service profession. Dudden calls this “silent but eloquent testimony” from the young working-class

²⁹² *Des Moines Daily News*, February 13, 1899.

²⁹³ *Northwest Chronicle* (Fort Dodge), July 9, 1890.

²⁹⁴ *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, December 15, 1896.

²⁹⁵ *Iowa State Register*, August 7, 1877.

immigrant women who had to grow up early in domestic service.²⁹⁶ Not only did they wish to disassociate themselves from the domestic service industry, but the movement of Irish immigrants and their offspring away from service to other parts of the workforce highlights the lessons immigrant girls had been taught about American independence. Utilizing the 1870 Dubuque County census, we find that even in 1870, of the women employed in domestic service, seventy-two were immigrant women from Ireland, and nine were the daughters of Irish immigrants. This confirms the argument that Irish immigrant women kept their daughters out of service in Iowa.

Abundant evidence suggests that around the turn of the century, when the offspring of Irish immigrants were reaching working-age, Iowa was facing a major servant shortage. An 1899 editorial in the Des Moines *Iowa State Register* alerted the readership that “Fort Dodge is suffering from a well-developed servant girl famine.”²⁹⁷ It reported that even though up to \$4 a week was being offered for girls employers were finding it impossible to secure employees. This was not due to a lack of girls in the area seeking employment, the author wrote, but because girls were preferring to work for lesser wages in stores than as servants. It was better for these second-generation immigrant girls to hold tightly to the cherished American virtue of freedom—at the sacrifice of higher wages—than for the Irish ethnic cohort to continue to be associated with a restrictive service industry. The same paper in 1899 conveyed that Des Moines was also suffering from a famine in servant girls, and that “this problem is becoming a real one, and thousands of troubled housewives are hoping and praying that it will be

²⁹⁶ Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 235.

²⁹⁷ *Iowa State Register*, September 22, 1899.

solved.”²⁹⁸ It was reported that a North Des Moines man (presumably a civic official or domestic service employer) was claiming that one thousand servant girls were needed but that it was practically impossible to get those girls. He wanted the *Register* to publicize that shortage in hopes of attracting women to migrate to Iowa.²⁹⁹ Earlier, in 1886, an article in the *Davenport Gazette* said that servant girls were so scarce in the Cedar Rapids area that an agent had “started into the business of canvassing the towns in that vicinity for desirable female help.”³⁰⁰

The *Fort Dodge Messenger*, looking at an article from the *Sioux City Journal*, in 1899, also inquired into the absence of servant girls.³⁰¹ It wondered what had happened to all of the girls who used to drop by in the dozens in reply to the three-line advertisement “Domestic Help Wanted-Female?” And it asked, “Has the earth opened and swallowed them up? Have they all got married? Has the deadly gasoline can got ‘em? Whither have they drifted?” In answer to these questions the article cited the *Le Mars Post*, which said that:

The query of the Journal is very easily answered. The girls who might have been “hired girls” have sought other avenues of employment and are now found in the shops, stores, offices, school rooms and many other places where men only were formerly employed; and the American families have driven them there.

This article substantially confirms the argument that domestic servants consciously picked up on the degradation attached to service work. Once they had the resources to be employed somewhere with less social stigma attached, they did not

²⁹⁸ *Iowa State Register*, September 21, 1899.

²⁹⁹ *Iowa State Register*, September 20, 1899.

³⁰⁰ *Davenport Gazette*, November 18, 1886.

³⁰¹ *Fort Dodge Messenger*, “The “Hired Girl”,” September 22, 1899.

hesitate to utilize the lesson that success in America is partly a result of independence and to leave service permanently. The author of the *Le Mars Post* went on to write that the servant girl was looked upon as “only a hired girl” and not recognized anywhere outside the kitchen, “while the typewriter girl, the shop girl, clerk and teacher, can go into the best society in almost any town...” The “hired girl...is treated as a slave and the work that she is doing is looked upon as degrading.” Immigrant girls working as domestic servants “became white” by deciding that they wanted to emulate the decision native American-born girls had made decades earlier: to avoid the “social ostracism” associated with service and seek employment, described by the *Weekly Albia Union* in “a direction where she can hold up her head and be recognized by the more fortunate...”³⁰²

Second generation Irish-Americans were much less likely to enter domestic service and instead began to enter the middle class in much larger numbers. Between 1880 and 1920 the number of white immigrant women working as domestic servants dropped by half.³⁰³ Instead Irish immigrant women began to enter other occupations open to single women, such as teaching. In 1894 the *Daily State Press* located in Iowa City reported that Miss Alice Donohue had left for Des Moines, where she was to attend a school for future teachers for the winter in the Sister of Charity Seminary of that city in which her sister was also a member.³⁰⁴ In 1898 the *Palo Alto Reporter* noted that Miss Anna Donovan was one of the instructors in the Teachers’ Institute in Estherville, Iowa.³⁰⁵

³⁰² *Weekly Albia Union*, November 1, 1883.

³⁰³ Schultz, “The Black Mammy,” 205-206.

³⁰⁴ *Daily State Press*, “News Items on the Nolan Settlement,” Johnson County, Iowa, November 10, 1894, located at <http://www.celticcousins.net/irishiniowa/nolansettlement.htm>.

³⁰⁵ *Palo Alto Reporter*, Emmetsburg, August 5, 1898.

The stories and examples offered in this chapter point to the influence Irish female immigrants exercised in nineteenth-century Iowa towards helping the Irish “become white” and climb the rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Iowa was not a haven from the nativism that was so common on the East Coast, and Midwestern American Protestants continued to display attitudes of fear and prejudice towards the Catholic Irish immigrants. Despite this, the often young and single female immigrants swelled the ranks of domestic service positions, where they learned valuable lessons about middle-class domesticity. Domestic service was an education in American values, and was also responsible for impressing Irish women in Iowa with new ideas about material comforts. Irish female immigrants were not blind to the degraded nature of service in the United States. As the century wore to an end, Irish servants in Iowa rejected service for its un-American association with dependency.

Conclusion

“Irish America,” Janet Nolan wrote, “has foremothers at least as much as forefathers.”³⁰⁶ This work set out to explore those foremothers and honor their overlooked but incredibly valuable achievements. In looking at push and pull factors for the participation of women in the world-wide Irish diaspora, it found that Irish women left Ireland because the post-Famine situation severely curtailed their opportunities to work and get married. This made numerous Irish women superfluous members of Irish society, and many of them turned to emigration as a way to fulfill their expectations for life. The number of Irish women who immigrated to the United States during the post-Famine period of immigration and at times they even outnumbered them. Women knew they could count on employment in the form of domestic service in the United States, and families in Ireland knew they could count on women to continue to finance immigration and support those who remained at home in the form of remittances.

Most studies of Irish immigrants look at their experiences on East Coast cities, namely Boston and New York. But by 1880, there were 44,061 persons of Irish descent living in Iowa. There was an Irish man or woman in every single one of the ninety-nine Iowa counties. This almost screams for someone to write the story of these men and women. The Irish immigrants who continued their journey west found a beautiful prairie state which almost certainly would have reminded them of their own lush and green Ireland that they had permanently left behind. Iowa, according to an 1870 pamphlet

³⁰⁶ Janet Nolan, “Women’s Place in the History of the Irish Diaspora: A Snapshot,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28 (2009): 77, accessed July 18, 2015, <http://0-www.jstor.org.library.ucc.ie/stable/40543472>.

published by the Iowa Board of Immigration, is said to mean in the language of Native American tribes, “The Beautiful Land.”³⁰⁷

This work looks at what caused so many Irish immigrants to settle in Iowa and what their experiences on the frontier were like. It found that both men and women were attracted by the promises of land and opportunities for work offered in the new state, as well as the marriage market. The Irish women who arrived in Iowa either as single or married women found ways to reassert their status in Iowa and exert their social influence. Iowa was a new state in need of populating and women to help shape its formation. Irish immigrant women were absolutely vital in this process, along the way regaining much of the social status they had lost in post-Famine Ireland.

Because so many Irish immigrants were young single women, they were represented in the world of wage work in a significant way. Iowa, as a state newly admitted to the Union, was in need of labor to help it develop. Single Irish immigrant women who continued their journey west were often employed in the burgeoning domestic service sector. Demand never quite seemed to equal supply for this line of work. Several Iowa newspapers in the nineteenth-century printed articles on the interestingly termed “servant girl famine,” and leading community members even sent advertisements to East Coast cities, in an effort to attract young women to come to Iowa to work as servants. Irish women took advantage of this need and high numbers of them were employed as domestic servants in nineteenth-century Iowa. Domestic service was difficult work, and the overrepresentation of Irish women gave rise to the unfortunate “Bridget” stereotype. Despite this, its initial benefits were numerous. It allowed Irish

³⁰⁷ Iowa Board of Immigration, “Iowa: The Home for Immigrants,” 9.

immigrant women to live in a respectable home prior to marriage, to save their earnings to send home, and it served as a stopgap before marriage. The wages these women earned and the fact that theirs was a stable employment meant that Irish women were able to be financially independent in a way they no longer could in Ireland.

Both single and married Irish women on the Iowa frontier were involved in a variety of other work as well, detailed throughout these pages. Domestic service was the most popular form of employment for Irish women employed outside the home, but Irish immigrant women in Iowa were also cooks, dress makers, teachers, seamstresses, and more. After marriage, Irish women in Iowa tended to stop working for wages outside the home, but their work on the newly developing farms of the state was absolutely invaluable. Women made important economic contributions to farms which were often uncultivated prairie when their husbands first purchased them. They helped make many Iowa Irish farms into profitable enterprises, as the stories throughout this work have shown. Despite this, records around the time period, such as county biographies, make it clear that women were not acknowledged for their work. Farm women were sometimes responsible for over a dozen tasks both inside the house and on the farm in one day, while also being responsible for childbearing and childrearing. Irish immigrant women in Iowa were able to regain a sense of economic equality with their husbands that was no longer possible in post-Famine Ireland after marriage because their responsibilities on the farm were vital for a successful agricultural business. However, immigration was not a total escape from patriarchal ideas about women's roles, and married Irish women in Iowa assumed many of the same domestic responsibilities after their marriage that they would have in Ireland and were still not granted equal recognition for their work.

By the time of the Great Potato Famine and the worsening of conditions in post-Famine Ireland, cities on the East Coast, such as New York and Philadelphia, were already bustling, populated places. Iowa beckoned for those who thought their chances for improvement might be better in a new state. Irish women in Iowa were an essential part of the process of Irish immigrants improving the overall economic and social status of their ethnic group. Involvement in domestic service was a “whitening” process. The women who participated in it not only acquired ideas about middle-class affluence and what signs of respectability they would want to have in their own homes one day, but domestic service was also an education in American values. It taught Irish immigrant women the importance placed in society on independence. This is seen nowhere any better than in the multitude of newspapers who reported at the end of the century that servant girls were turning away from service to jobs at stores or in factories—which often paid less but included a freedom and self-respect that the service occupation did not.

This work could have been enriched through the discovery of something left behind by Irish women in Iowa employed as domestic servants. Because servants, even those who did know how to write, rarely had the time or resources to write their thoughts and feelings about domestic service down, such a source was hard to find. Instead this work has had to utilize newspaper articles, contemporary biographies, and other secondhand sources. Because this thesis aimed to bring together so many types of history: women’s history, Irish history, labor history, and Midwestern history—the possibilities for further study of this topic are almost endless and the works that remain to be read are numerous.

Further work on this topic would also benefit from a more comprehensive look at census reports. This would entail looking at the Irish population of Iowan censuses throughout the period of 1840 to 1900, instead of just the 1870 one studied here. In this way the argument about change over time in occupations of Irish immigrant women and their offspring could be additionally solidified through studying their involvement at the beginning of the period and the end. This would also help with looking further into what positions Irish-American women took up in place of service, beyond the anecdotal evidence offered in newspapers and family histories. A more comprehensive look at census reports throughout the state of Iowa instead of just Dubuque County could also serve as a rich source for identifying Irish immigrant trends in the state of Iowa. Furthermore, though this study focuses on Irish immigrant women and as such any comparisons made between ethnic groups were limited, more research into the censuses of Iowa during this period could provide fascinating comparisons between ethnic group experiences, such as Irish and German.

Adding the voices of women to history has made tremendous gains in the past few decades. But there is still tremendous work that needs to be done, and stories that need to be heard. Irish-American history is a personal history. The women who emigrated from Ireland, often single and young, were unbelievably courageous. The work they went on to do in both Iowa and the United States was extraordinarily significant for the way it changed the course of their lives and the impact it had on the developing frontier state of nineteenth-century Iowa.

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Davenport Gazette

Iowa State Bystander

Northwest Chronicle

Der Demokrat

Des Moines Daily News

Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette

Fort Dodge Messenger

Daily State Press

County Biographies and Histories (note: these sources range from 1879 to 1925 and as such not all fit into the period of 1840-1900 as primary sources. I have utilized them as primary sources throughout this work, however, for what they have to say (or more often, for what they don't say) about Irish women in Iowa counties in the 19th century. Excerpts pertaining to the Irish men and women mentioned in this thesis can be found at www.irishiniowa.com.)

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