

A tribute to the Irish, especially Samuel Fitzpatrick

By J B Leftwich

Samuel Fitzpatrick was born in 1799, grew up and married Elizabeth Ann Cross, fathered William J. Fitzpatrick who sired ten children, the last of whom was Maud.

All were from the Buffalo Valley region of Putnam County.

I know nothing more about Samuel. If there are Fitzpatricks who read this newspaper and who know about Samuel, I wish they would contact me.

Samuel played an essential role in my life. If he had not appeared at precisely the right time, if he had not taken a fancy to cute little Elizabeth Ann, and if he had decided against children, a column authored by another writer would be occupying this space today.

True, he was not the star in my personal drama. He was just one player in a bracket of players that reaches through the decades to the beginning of the human race. If any one player in this tournament of progenitors had decided to remain celibate, my name would not be in the winner's space.

Samuel, you see, was the grandfather of Maud who was the grandmother of me.

He also is the seat of an irony that asserted itself after it was too late to ask the questions that should have been asked when my grandmother was present in our family circle. She knew about her grandparents, and she would have welcomed interest from me, but in those years my mind was not on the subject of ancestors.

I wonder if a few of Samuel's genes reside in my psyche. Born, as he was, just a few years after our colonies became a country, it seems likely he was at most a couple of generations removed from Ireland. And I wonder if some of my tastes and traits derive from this Irish-American.

Today is St. Patrick's Day, a brief interval each year when descendants of the Irish turn our thoughts to the Emerald Isle and proudly wear the green. Some of us also shift our thoughts to Irish verse, especially the limerick, which, according to tradition, had its origin in Limerick, Ireland.

It would require a stretch of imagination to attribute my love of the limerick to a Samuel Fitzpatrick gene. Maybe it was Samuel's grandfather who sent this bent cruising through the generations to lodge in my being. Nevertheless, I enjoy reading them and I enjoy writing them. Here is one I wrote:

*Once a grebe and a grouse and a mouse
Decided they would buy a small house.*

*But their plans went astray
When the mouse ran away,
Cause the grebe was so gross to the grouse.*

Maybe a pint of Guinness on this day when, in some cities, the beer runs green, would mellow the mood for limericks.

Indeed, the limerick is firmly anchored in Wilson County and its native son, Dixon Merritt, who wrote a five-liner many argue is the most famous limerick of all.

Mr. Merritt, my journalism teacher in Cumberland University, disclaimed affection for his limerick, claiming he wrote it to fill space in short column, and wavered for many days before deciding to print it. His pupils believed he was secretly proud of it. Here it is, once again:

*A wonderful bird is the pelican.
His beak can hold more than his belly can.
He can hold in his beak
Enough food for a week
But I' m damned if I know how the hellhecan.*

I don't know whether Mr. Merritt had Irish antecedents, but I am fully aware of his influence on me, both in the field of journalism and in the playground of limerick authorship. I have no hope that the following verse will alight near the Pelican. With absence of modesty, here it is:

*Once a mouse of computer persuasion
Met the mice in a rodent invasion
Said one of the mice:
"This electronic device
Is a Dell of a mousical mutation."*

On this day, I remember Ireland and the pleasure we experienced during a tour of the island in 1985. I remember the loyalty of the Irish to their patron saint - and to the brewers of Guinness, as I tip my green baseball cap to the late, great Dixon Merrit.

And I wish I could remember Samuel Fitzpatrick who may have been my genetic link to the traditions of the Irish.

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