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MAINE VOICES

Bill dishonors immigrants of all stripes who helped build this great country

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By Robert F. Lyons Special to the Press Herald

A story of Irish ancestors should humble leaders who would further narrow the door to America.

KENNEBUNKPORT — While the sniping about changes in U.S. immigration policies continues to swirl around (“Kathleen Parker: High-wire verbal duel ushers in hot dog days of summer politics,” Aug. 8), it is ironic that it was five days after the reopening of the Irish Hunger Memorial, which faces the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, that the president of the United States, Donald Trump, publicly embraced legislation put forward by two Republican senators that will “favor applicants who can speak English, financially support themselves and their families, and demonstrate skills that will contribute to our economy.”

Something snapped in my Irish spine when I read that Republican Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, the bill’s primary sponsor, said that the current immigration system doesn’t attract “the very best talent” and gets mostly low or unskilled workers.

To repudiate that insult to my County Waterford ancestors, I would like to tell the story of my first American relatives, whose

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert F. Lyons is a resident of Kennebunkport.

experience resonates with that promised to immigrants “yearning to breathe free.”

To the president and the sponsors of this horrific bill, I urge them to go to the Irish Hunger Memorial and pay their respects to the millions of immigrants, from all countries, who took entry-level jobs to build America.

In a pest house in New York City, my great-grandparents Jeremiah and Ellen Lyons had their first glimpse of their new home, America.

Forced to flee famine and oppression, they left Dungarvan, Ireland, in 1845. Filled with hope and \$1,500 sewn into Jeremiah’s underwear, they made the crossing. But when Jeremiah caught cholera aboard ship, he was isolated from his wife and two young daughters, Bridget and Margaret. Upon arrival in New York, unknown

to Ellen, Jeremiah was placed in a pest house, nursed by anonymous caretakers.

For three months, Ellen searched every shanty and shack in New York City, until, in the words of the story recited at every family reunion, one day a man replied: “Well, yes, but it just couldn’t be him, he was so old and bearded and thin.”

If she wished, she was told, she may come in and look. There were no records on the book. He seemed to be traveling alone. His memory was gone, and he was without name or home.

Thus, she found her Jerry, lying on a bed of straw. He raised his head and whispered: “Ellen.” The money had disappeared. What had happened to him in the intervening months was not established. After Ellen nursed Jerry back to health, they joined with Chinese laborers to build railroads from New York to Chicago.

Near that windy city, with a growing family – including my paternal grandfather, Will – they became successful farmers and later moved to Iowa and, finally, Dakota Territory, where they spent the autumn of their lives with their pioneer sons and daughters.

Ellen and Jeremiah brought with them, and passed to their children, and their grandchildren, a passion for education and a strong commitment to the civic virtues of their new country.

They were the real radicals in America’s history. These people lived in their adopted land not as victims, but as confident and contributing citizens, whose fulfillment was in helping to build this country.

When I reflect on their odyssey, I realize that the journey to my home began in a pest house in New York, where the kindness of strangers gave my first American relatives a taste of the goodness and greatness of its people.

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Ellen Whelan Lyons
1821-1889

Hunger Memorial and pay their respects to the millions of immigrants, from all countries, who took entry-level jobs to build America.

As they walk among the fieldstones, which are engraved with the names of all the counties of Ireland, they will see that in this patch of earth “is packed the memory of the calamity” (to quote historian Simon Schama, writing in the Aug. 19, 2002, New Yorker) and of opportunity in a new country. And when they emerge, the president and lawmakers can “gaze north and south at the canyons of capitalism, and marvel at the certainties of the rich.”

America is great, and will become greater when it acknowledges all those who made it so in the first place.