

Meeting my grandfather

HOLAN, FROM PAGE G-1

I obtained the police and coroner's reports of his death. I learned his uniform badge number and the number of the trolley car he was operating.

My grandfather's younger brother wrote in a statement for the coroner that William had "been in good health all his life and had never complained of any illness." He wrote that William recently had been examined by a Pittsburgh Railways Co. doctor and was "pronounced in good health."

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh supplied a sacramental record that confirmed a family story that a priest administered last rites in front of St. Mary's Church. A notation said "suddenly."

I reviewed the Pittsburgh Railways archives at the University of Pittsburgh and visited the Pennsylvania Trolley Museum. Neither had anything specific about my grandfather, but I did learn more about the company he worked for. I also stepped aboard a restored version of the 1920s-era trolley of his last trip.

My mother and her four surviving sisters said their father was a quiet man who let his wife be the family disciplinarian. He helped the girls with their school work and took them for walks along Second Avenue in Hazelwood, then a bustling strip.

I wanted to hear William Diggin's voice. What had he done for work his first years in America? What were his views on Irish

independence and the partition of the island? What did he think of FDR's efforts to deal with the economic woes of the day?

I asked family members in Pittsburgh and relatives Ireland to check for letters or diaries. There seemed to be none.

I visited my grandfather's grave at Calvary Cemetery. I was struck by the 42-year gap between his death and the passing of his wife; the grandmother whose Irish brogue and laughter I had enjoyed.

On a cold December morning I re-traced the old 57 Glenwood trolley route from Hazelwood. "Pittsburgh Railways Company" remains etched on the red-brick former car barn on Second Avenue, now a senior center. I drove toward town, past vacant land that once was the Jones & Laughlin mill.

At the bottom of Third, I visited St. Mary's Church, the only building still in place from 1941. Outside, people were rushing in the chill. Inside, I lit a votive candle in remembrance of William Diggin.

I had found most records of my grandfather at my finger tips or through easy requests. I had covered some of the same ground as him and talked with his daughters. Like most genealogy, it made for an interesting project; but it was no substitute for the opportunity to meet the man.

That's something Google can't arrange.

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