

The Gill's from Ballyclemock
By Jim Gill
Submitted 2013

Our family story is based on work done by my cousin, the family genealogist, and my grandfather who in his 90th year wrote a tale of his parents travel to America.

The first immigrant in our family, William Gill, was born on a farm in Ballyclemock, County Wexford in 1835. He left Cork in the summer of 1854 on a sailing ship. It took them six weeks to land in Canada because they ran into a hurricane half way across. He then went to Chicago via the Great Lakes. All of his siblings came to America except one. Nicholas stayed to take care of his parents.

William then joined a group of Irishmen who went to New Orleans, then to Panama, where they caught a sailing ship headed to San Francisco. They were headed to the California goldfields. After 18 months they realized that they were too late to strike it rich. William joined a wagon train and walked back to Illinois.

He began to work for a Stark County, Illinois farmer. Soon he met and later married Catherine Colgan, who had come with her mother from County Down. Her uncle paid the passage for many Colgans after that. They rented a farm in Peoria County, then bought 80 acres of swamp land a few miles farther north. William used his trusty irish spade and dug a ditch to drain the land. He did not know it then but his gold was in the black soils of the Valley. Now, 140 years later his great grandson farms this land today (approximately 20 miles north of Peoria near Speer, IL).

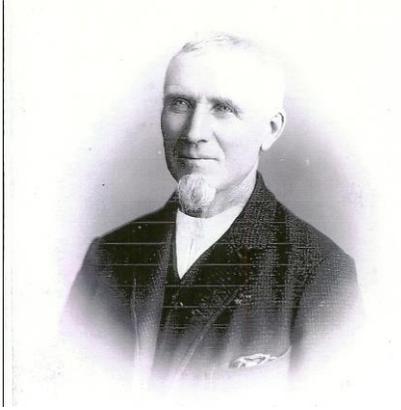
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FROM JIM GILL:

The story about draining the land came from my grandfather. Valley township in Stark County was the last area in the county to be settled. The Irish came first and then the Dutch/Germans, all of whom knew how to handle wetland. Our family actually owned 40 acres of peat land. In a dry year, the soil would start to burn and it smolder for months. I remember the fires.

The first settlers in the 1830's wanted to live in the forested areas. The county was part of the Military Tract west of the Illinois River. Soldiers who fought in the War of 1812 were given patents or ownership of 40 and 80 acre tracts. Most of these were sold or gambled away. The Colgans from County Down were early purchasers and William Gill married a Colgan.

We went to Ireland in 1987 and found my cousins. Paddy Gill and I walked to the lowland pasture that was my ancestors farm in Ballyclemock Townland, County Wexford. He pointed to a pile of stones that he said was the ruins of my family's ancient cottage.

I remember the various tools in my grandfathers shop. Many had been acquired by his father William. Spades were among them but I was too young to know what each was used for. I Googled a couple of good articles on spades used to dig peat. The draining of the area sometimes called the Baffolow Wallows and later the laying of the flat bottomed tile was all done by hand. My grandfather's dug a good well that was only twelve feet deep.



William Gill Sr. 1833-1921