

The Traveling People

Not long after leaving Shannon Airport, the visitor to Ireland will observe aluminum trailers along the roadside with a clothes line filled with a family's wash drying in the breeze. These trailers belong to Ireland's traveling people, known to many as the "tinkers." Who are these traveling people?

Very little is known about the origin of the travelers. Various theories have been proposed: they are descendants of people in Irish history who had been evicted from their lands; they are descendants of traveling tradesmen, such as tinsmiths; they are descendants of traveling bards. There is no doubt that they are Irish, attested to by their names and physical appearance. The romanticized version of the travelers lives in the ceramic horse drawn caravan found in every gift shop and in the stories of immigrants from Ireland who report about the bad luck which attends not giving a "tinker" the eggs or milk he requests. But the real story of Ireland's traveling people can be surmised from the street beggars in Ennis who when they get 10p, ask for 50p; from the freckle-faced, red-headed lad in Dublin who walks beside shoppers with hand outstretched; from the advisory in newspapers asking tourists not to give handouts to beggars; from the sight of a "Madonna and child" sitting with her hand out on O'Connell Bridge on a chill, drizzling night.

The begging and the usual suspicion that attaches itself to itinerant people have made the traveling people an unpopular sub-culture in Ireland. Their being labeled tinkers is one indication of their status in Irish society. The word "tinker" can have a neutral meaning of mender of pots and pans, but it is most commonly associated with itinerants and gypsies with rough habits. In 1896, Katherine Tynan in the "Westminster Gazette" reports that "They are a wild lawless set, and 'tinker-' has come to be an abusive term in Ireland from its association with them." A report from Galway in the summer of 1986 shows that in the 100 intervening years little has changed in attitudes toward the travelers. This report tells about 70 people with sticks and hurleys attempting to push traveling people out of a field close to private homes. The caravans of the five families were finally removed by tractors pushing them out of the field.

Concerned about the plight of their traveling flock, the Catholic Bishops' Council sponsored a study of the traveling people, its result published as "A Report of the Bishops' Council for Social Welfare on the Traveling People." Progress is being made in settling these peoples in homes. In the early 1960's travelers lived up to their name. They lived in horse drawn caravans and tents; the men made buckets and cans and traded in horses while the women begged, mostly from farmers. Children received enough education to qualify for First Confession and Communion. In 1960, over 95% of traveling people lived on the road, whereas in 1984 57% were living in standard housing or on serviced sites. The traveler population is now about 3108 families with 1301 families still on the roadside. With no water, electricity, sanitation or refuse collection, the travelers who are still on the road live in squalor, creating poor health conditions for themselves and creating a blot on the community that adds to the tension and antagonism existing between the travelers and the settled community.

The Council Report highlights several concerns for this small minority of Irish (0.5% of the overall population). One is health. Life expectancy among the travelers is low and infant mortality high compared to the general population. A second is education. Because of their lifestyle, only half of the school-aged children are in school and virtually all of the adults are illiterate. A chief concern is the attitude of settled Irish toward their co-religionists. Settled

people stereotype travelers as dirty, drunken, lazy, violent, and involved in crime. Like all stereotypes, these attitudes are exaggerated but the Council has called upon the travelers to eliminate practices like brawling, street begging and allowing horses to wander.

Will Ireland succeed in settling its traveling people? Will Ireland be wise to settle its traveling people? Should everyone be "settled"? Visitors to Ireland can see for themselves if the beggars and caravans begin to fade from the Irish urban and rural scene. Perhaps in the future the tinkers" will be seen not on the roadside or on the streets of Galway but in Bunratty Castle Folk Park alongside the thatched cottage.

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