Excerpt from
The McGuires of County Donegal
© 2007 Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, CG
All rights reserved.

When Hugh McGuire left Ireland to find a better life in America, the family story says he embarked with two baked potatoes in his pocket. But what he left behind was his family who had planted their own roots deeply into the County Donegal earth for centuries. Hugh and his parents lived in that part of County Donegal known as the townland of Kilrean Upper. County Donegal is in the northernmost part of the country, on the west.

The first Hugh McGuire, father of Hugh the immigrant, was born around 1800. This first Hugh McGuire's landlord was the Reverend George N. Tredennick, who owned all of Kilrean Upper, about fifteen hundred acres, in 1857. Situated on a hill with a view of a valley, the McGuire house sat on twenty-four acres of land. When Hugh and Mary Malloy married around 1845, the population of the townland was not quite three hundred people, who occupied fifty-four houses with each household averaging five to six people.[1]

As was common for people who lived in rural Ireland,[2] Hugh and Mary lived in a one-story, rectangular-shaped farmhouse with about 490 square feet of living space made from field stone and clay-and-lime mortar. Originally, the house had a thatched roof and was either whitewashed or left in its natural state. The three-room floor plan had a hearth at each end, and a central front door, leading into a main room kitchen, with a bedroom that flanked on the west end. At the east end of the house, a small room (117 square feet) with a lower roof originally served as a byre (a barn attached to the house) for a milch cow or two. The original front door was likely a half-door, with the top half left open in good weather. Half-doors allowed sunlight to illuminate the interior, while keeping children in and animals out. A back door was directly opposite the front door, and both were far enough away from the kitchen fireplace to allow for cross ventilation, as well as to regulate the draughts and smoke from the turf fire. In the McGuire house, there were four windows in the main part of the house: two in the front and two opposite in the back. Smaller, opposite windows also were part of the byre. The rectangular shape of houses like the McGuire's originated partly from custom and partly from superstition. Houses should not be more than one room wide, they believed, otherwise the family would get smaller.

---

[1] Tax record for Hugh M'Guire, Richard Griffith, Commissioner of Valuation, *General Valuation of Rateable Property in Ireland, Union of Glenties, Valuation of the Several Tenements, Comprised in the Above-Named Union, Situate in the County of Donegal* (Dublin, Ireland: Alex. Thom and Sons, 1857), 138.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, information on rural Irish daily life and work in the mid to late nineteenth century has come from three excellent sources on the topic: E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publishing, 1957); Kevin Danaher, *Irish Country Households* (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1999); and Olive Sharkey, *Ways of Old: Traditional Life in Ireland* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 2000).

If more room was needed, the house could be enlarged in length. In fact, many houses were built near the slope of rising ground, as the McGuire house was, making them difficult to widen.

Precisely when the McGuire house was built and by whom remains a mystery,[3] but the farmhouse that stands on the property today was typical of those built in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, so Hugh might have built this house himself. After choosing the site on the land where to build the house, custom and superstition also dictated that Hugh needed to place four rods or four piles of stones at the four corners of his intended homesite. One could never tell if the proposed site had once been an ancient Celtic burial site, and a farmer would not want to evoke the wrath of spirits or fairies. If the stones or rods were left undisturbed after a night, then it was safe to build on the spot.

As was the custom, after hiring a fiddler to liven the occasion and with the assistance of neighbors, Hugh would have built the roof frame and coupled rafters of the house from bog-oak. There was next to no timber to be had due to centuries of deforestation to clear farmland, so rural folks in the northwest of Ireland used fossil oak and pine found in the bogs. In this area of County Donegal where Hugh lived, 62 percent of the landscape was bog—a wet, spongy ground, rich in plant residues. Men, women, and children all pitched in for house building, and they carried and placed the field stones, imbedded the clay-and-lime mortar mixture, and gathered flax straw to thatch the roof. Once the roof frame was in place, the men carefully fitted grass sods (scraws) over the frame to insulate the roof from the damp and cold and to provide a hold for the rods (scollops) to secure the thatch. One of the traditional methods of securing the thatch was to place a net of ropes over the roof, using large rocks at the ends and letting the weighted ropes hang from the eaves or tying them to pegs on the outside walls.[4]

Once the family was settled in the house, women like Mary Malloy McGuire spent the majority of their day in the kitchen by the open hearth, keeping the turf fire burning. This central fireplace was critical for cooking, keeping the house warm, ensuring the scraws and underthatch were kept dry, and providing light in the evenings. Some families burned homemade candles or makeshift oil lamps, such as a scallop shell or bowl containing fish oil, lard, or butter with a wick made from lint or twisted string. Each evening before the wife went to bed, she placed ashes over the embers to keep it smoldering, so that in the morning all she needed to do was rake it with a poker to bring the fire back to life.

Judging from the McGuire house as it stands today, Hugh and Mary had an open hearth at floor level, and the kitchen area probably had flagstone flooring, making it easy for Mary to sweep and keep clean. Folks kept the entire space in front of the hearth open, and what sparse furniture they had was placed against walls. A big dresser—or what we would call today a china cabinet—was the most elaborate piece of furniture in the kitchen, and it stood at the opposite end of the hearth on the wall that separated kitchen and bedroom. On the four or five open shelves at

---

[3] The house is presently owned by Eammon Boyle, who is a distant cousin to the McGuires. The chain of title goes from Rose McGuire in 1911 to Mary Anne McGuire in 1957, to Daniel Joseph Boyle in 1958, to John Patrick Boyle in 1966, to Daniel Boyle in 1997, then to Eammon Boyle.

[4] F.H.A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan, and Matthew Stout, eds., *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* (Crosses Green, Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 106.

the top, women like Mary displayed their blue-and-white willow-patterned china, earthenware mugs, crockery, and dishes. In dresser drawers were eating utensils, and if the bottom had open cabinets, Mary might have used this as a coop for the hens. If the McGuires had a kitchen table at all, it would have been set against another wall, usually under a window, and in some households, the table was a "falling table," one that could be folded up against the wall when not in use.

Near the fireplace, there would have been two wooden stools or chairs where the husband and wife, Mary and Hugh, sat. Their children would either sit on the floor or on low "creepies." These three-legged stools have their origins in chimneyless cottages, where the family had to sit low below the smoke. Because the floor in rural houses was often uneven, three-legged stools provided more balance. Another possible piece of furniture in Hugh and Mary's kitchen was a settle-bed. During the day, it served as a bench-like seat with a back; during the night, the seat portion was on hinges that allowed it to be lowered, revealing a straw mattress fit inside the box frame for another bed.

The bedroom was also sparsely furnished and was originally one room where the entire family slept. (In later years, McGuire descendants made this area into two small bedrooms.) There would be at least one bed for the master and mistress of the household, the frame made from bog-oak with a crisscross of ropes to support a straw mattress. Pillows were stuffed with chicken or goose feathers. Children slept on woven rush mats on the floor. The bedroom might also contain a washstand with basin and jug, a chamber pot, and a curtained alcove for clothing. The bedroom fireplace was also kept smoldering.

Because of the timber shortage, to keep the home fires burning, each April or May Hugh and his neighbors would pool their labor to work in the bogs to gather turf (also known as peat or sod) for fuel. It took the men about a week to gather enough turf cuttings to provide sufficient fuel for each family. "Ideally, the season's cut should contain a proportion of brown top turf that is light sphagnum peat for summer firing, and a proportion of black bottom peat for winter use: this is moist humified peat which dries hard as a brick and burns almost like coal." To open up a turf bank, men used a spade to remove about a foot of the top layer of tough fibrous peat, which grew heather, tough grasses, and mosses. On occasion, the men might dig up from the turf banks cloth, wooden, or basket containers of "bog butter." In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, people buried butter in the bogs, possibly for storage during the hot summer months.

Once the top layer of turf was removed, men used another digging tool called a breast-plough, although it was actually pushed forward using the hips and thighs. Each cut of turf (peat) could weigh up to twenty pounds, and they were then placed directly onto a turf barrow. They spread out the turf on the ground for a week or two, then turned them, so the peat would dry out from the wind. The men's children would then help out by leaning the turf blocks together in the shape of a pitched roof for further drying. Throughout the summer months, the children constantly turned the peat and placed them in larger piles as the wind dried them. Once dried, the peat developed a waterproof layer, and a small supply was then taken into the house for use, while the rest was stacked and stored near the house.[5]…

---

[5] Quote from Evans, *Irish Folk Ways,* 187; the description of gathering peat comes from Evans, 188–197.