

Garvin, Cornelius, papers

A
TRUE
 STORY OF
 A
VALIANT MOTHER'S STRUGGLE
DURING THE CIVIL WAR

Every war has its quota of sad, happy and shocking stories. The Civil War certainly was no exception. A collection of papers and documents recently acquired tells a story of indomitable courage and serve to inspire respect and admiration for the valiant Irish mother of whom the documents concern.

The collection consisting of sixty letters, documents and broadsheets date from 1863 to 1894 and reveal little of the background of Catherine Garvin herself. Of her personal struggle against unseemingly odds much is told.

The first manuscript in the collection, written over two folio pages in an unknown hand, takes up Mrs. Garvin's story in 1845 and gives the tale the setting.

That year of her son Cornelius' birth and the subsequent years were perhaps happy ones for the Garvin family. Then we are told that in 1850 a most dreadful and devastating famine occurred in Ireland - the worst on record. Instinctively the Garvin's eyes and hopes turned to America. On a cold November day, leaving friends and kin behind, the Garvins set sail in the ship Jazedde, arriving in New York after a voyage of eight weeks. They remained in New York City only briefly, removing to Troy, New York where employment readily presented itself and life began anew.

As the years rolled by, the family again suffered reverses. Times were not easy. Young Cornelius, or Con as he was now known, was taken out of school and put to work in a paper mill where he remained for two or three years. Even his small earnings were needed to help keep the family together. From the paper mill Con went to work for a Patrick Brandon, a dealer in wood, remaining with him until 1861. On February 5, 1860, tragedy struck once more. Catherine's husband died and the burden of raising her adolescent son fell upon her.

The strain and shock apparently took its toll of Con. His record shows he shifted from job to job. Suddenly Con lost his mind and Mrs. Garvin's cup of bitterness was full.

After a medical examination, it was thought best to send young Con to the Marshall Infirmary, an institution established for the housing of those poor unfortunates who had lost their reason. Con remained there for six months and then was removed to the County House.

Catherine Garvin, when she could spare the time from her daily labors, visited her son to see that all was well with him. Then one day she sought him out and he was not to be found. Con had disappeared.

The story now unfolds in earnest, each step documented by an original letter, manuscript or clipping. Before unfolding the tale, a questionable custom of the time should be mentioned. It gravely affected the lives of both Mother and Son.

This custom was that of permitting conscripts, not wishing to fight for their country in the Civil War and who were financially well situated, to secure substitutes as replacements. By offering bounties they could "buy" someone to take their places in the war.

It soon became apparent young Con had fallen victim to the evils of this practice. He had been "stolen" from the County House on Sunday morning, Sept. 6, 1863, either at the direction of the Keeper or with his connivance and sold as a Substitute.

Mrs. Garvin at first did not know this. "Upon inquiring, she was informed by Mr. Keeper Taber that the boy was missing, but he was unable to give any information in regard to the manner of his escape from the premises."

Heartbroken, the mother abandoned her home and commenced a thorough search for the wanderer. She followed the river bank for days, thinking that her son might have drowned. Being unsuccessful, the idea occurred to her that he might have... "Fallen into the hands of some unprincipled recruiting officer, and accordingly she visited Albany for the purpose of examining the barracks." From one of the officers in Albany she learned that a boy answering the description of her Con had passed through Albany on his way to Riker's Island as a soldier.

Without waiting for further information Catherine left for New York and proceeded to Riker's Island. There Catherine learned that her son had been mustered into the 52nd N.Y. Regiment and had left with his regiment for Alexandria. She at once determined to go to Washington and lay her case before President Lincoln and Secretary of War. She was, however, advised to return to Troy and procure well authenticated certificates of her son's lunacy which would be sufficient to effect his release. This she did. The first document in the group is the signed certificate of J. Harrison, Superintendent of the Marshall Infirmary, dated Sept. 28, 1863, stating that young Garvin had been a patient and, having been pronounced incurable and idiotic, had been removed to the County House.

Clippings inform us that, with her certificate secured, Catherine Garvin promptly set out for Washington where she appealed to the War Department and the President. On this first visit she was not able to reach President Lincoln. The War Department however took an interest in her case and after three weeks advised her of their findings. They showed her the report of Col. Paul Frantz of the 52nd N.Y. Regiment which stated that nothing was known of Con's whereabouts. The boy had been known to have been with the regiment at Riker's Island but had left the transport of conscripts and substitutes somewhere on the road and disappeared.

While waiting to hear from the War Department, Catherine had not been idle. She had visited every camp and hospital in the vicinity of Washington and Alexandria. Her money gone, she returned to Troy, her determination to find her lost boy unaltered. She could take comfort in the knowledge that the case had been placed in the capable hands of Lafayette C. Baker, Special Agent of the War Department, who was later to aid in the capture of Abraham Lincoln's assassin.

This trip was only the first of five the mother made in search for her son. No stone was left unturned by her. She sought and secured the assistance and advice of the prominent officers and officials wherever she could reach them. Wide publicity was given her story. Many persons helped financially and otherwise. Still no trace of the son could be found. What money was given her or what little she earned, was spent in endless trips to hospitals and camps among the regiments of the Union Army.

Mrs. Garvin's efforts were made doubly difficult by confusing statements given her by soldiers of Con's regiment, some well-intentioned - others unaccounted for. Some soldiers claimed they had seen Con at Riker's Island. Others stated they had seen the him in camp at Alexandria. Still others asserted they had seen the boy at the time of the Spottsylvania campaign. One went so far as to certify that on May 18, during a battle, he had seen Con killed.

The courageous mother refused to believe this last statement and continued her quest. On April 4, 1864, Mayor James Thorn of Troy intervened and wrote a pleading letter on her behalf to Gov. Horatio Seymour of New York, seeking his influence and help. Fernando Wood, at this time Congressman from New York, on April 26, 1864, gave her a personal note of introduction to President Lincoln. While waiting for a Presidential audience, military passes, issued to her in April, 1864, show her to have been trudging tirelessly through the camps once again.

At long last Mrs. Garvin's case reached the President's ears and she was granted a interview. Abraham Lincoln could not but be affected by her story. Patiently he listened to her. On the back of an envelope which he gave her to present to Secretary Stanton, Lincoln wrote: "There is reason to believe this Cornelius Garvin is an idiot, and that he is kept in the 52nd N.Y. concealed & denied to avoid an exposure of guilty parties. Will the Secretary of War please have the thing probed. A Lincoln. May 21, 1864."

The reference to "guilty parties" was to a Captain Degner, newly chosen Captain of the N.Y. Regiment, whom certain soldiers had accused of threatening them if they dared make statements about having seen Con. The mother believed the stories of her boy's companions, false as these stories seem to have been. She turned all her bitterness against the officer who was later entirely cleared of any suspicion of misconduct by the Bureau of Military Justice.

The day after seeing Lincoln, Catherine was once again bending over the bodies of suffering boys, lying in the long rows of makeshift hospital beds, hoping ever to find her missing son. A pass to enter Wards 1 and 5 of the Lincoln General Hospital was issued to her on May 22, 1864.

A letter of Gen. James A. Hardie, at the time Colonel Inspector General, dated Sept. 14, 1864, and addressed to Catherine, shows an attempt to find Con under the assumed name of Charles Baker or Becker in the N.Y. Regiment has been fruitless.

A letter dated Oct. 6, 1864, reveals that Mrs. Garvin had received permission to visit the Prince St. Prison, Alisa Jail, Slave Pen., O.F.H. Prison, Washington St. Prison, Sickel Barracks Hospital, First, Second and Third Division General Hospitals, the Maryland Hospital for the Insane and the Barracks at 5th and Buttonwood. After each hospital or prison name mentioned, appears notations: "Not here", or "Not in this prison."

Once again the War Department tried to help. Lieutenant Baker, the Secret Service agent, went to great lengths on her behalf. Detectives were sent to New York and probed into the circumstances. An eight page report, dated June 12, 1865, and signed by Judge Advocate W. W. Winthrop of the Bureau of Military Justice, describing and reviewing all angles however acknowledged the case unsolved.

The Civil War ended by Catherine's efforts continued. April, 1866 found her following a pathetically false lead. Rumor had it at the General Hospital at David's Island in New York Harbor there was a patient, one Joseph Kerrin, who might be her son. But says a letter - "There is no person in this hospital at present named Cornelius Garvin nor is any of that name remembered as heretofore having been here. No man named Joseph Kerrin has been a patient here. If the photograph to which you refer were sent to me, I could inform you whether the person it represents is here."

Finally Mrs. Garvin, upon advice of lawyers, filed a pension claim on the supposition her son had been killed in battle. Her claim was promptly followed by a request for proof from the Pension Office on May 28, 1866. It was sent in, and shortly thereafter came a form letter, dated July 3, 1866, from the Commissioner of Pensions, coldly rejecting the claim on the grounds that "Cornelius Garvin was an Idiot, and Stolen from the County House...Consequently Catherine...could not have depended upon him for support."

However Mrs. Garvin had her backers. On July 5, John L. Flagg, then Mayor of Troy, intervened with the Secretary of War and personally requested the pension to be given her.

The War Department capitulated. The case was a blot on their record. In justice some reparation must be made this indomitable woman. On July 11, red tape was cut, and the pension was granted her. Though ostensibly accepting the fact of her son's death, the mother must have still hoped. In November, 1867, an official of the New York City Lunatic Asylum advised her that there was in their institution "no person answering to the name or description of her son."

A hiatus now occurs in the story. The dates of the collection jump from 1868 to 1894. It appears that Mrs. Garvin, with no hope left, finally chose to return to Ireland. Her departure brought on further troubles. The correspondence reveals that her pension was suspended on account of her residence outside of the United States. This matter too was cleared. A letter from the pension office, dated Feb. 6, 1894, states that, as she had been able satisfactorily to establish her citizenship in the United States, pension payment had been resumed.

There are not many rays of sunshine in Catherine Garvin's history. One can only hope that the closing years of her life spent in her native Ireland, may have partially erased the bitter memory of the terrible American Civil War interlude.

The story of Con Garvin, the idiot boy, is known to historians. Lafayette C. Baker in his book "History of the United States Secret Service," published in 1867 devotes four pages of his version of "Unavailing Efforts of a Mother in Search of her Idiotic Son."

However accurate the picture the published article by Baker, nothing can be more dramatic as told by the 60 documents in this collection which were the personal property of this valiant mother. This is the written, contemporary records of an unsolved mystery of the Civil War.