

Aunt Catherine and Uncle Al (who'd given me the Cub Scout uniform) only lived six blocks away. Aunt Catherine was my mother's sister. Uncle Al was a business writer and a poet.

By contrast, they lived in a proper house and drank soda pop.

My brother and I would venture over there, from time to time, to see what we might help out with. And in lieu of giving us a nickel,

Aunt Catherine would reward us with three or four empty Ginger Ale bottles which we could cash in for a nickel each!



They were very good to us. Aunt Catherine would also slip my mother a twenty-dollar bill (40% of our rent) when she could.



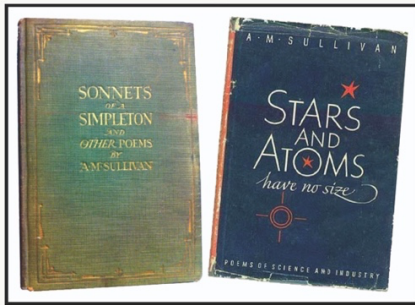
Uncle Al was the well-known poet, A.M. Sullivan – that is, as far as poets are “well-known” – but he did have all the markings of fame that I knew about: published collections, a weekly radio show, medals and honorary degrees.

Uncle Al's day job was with Dun & Bradstreet. He was the Editor of their business journal, the Dun's Review.

But as early as 1924, Uncle Al was turning out collections of romantic poetry, with his first title, “Sonnets of a Simpleton.” He'd publish 12 more collections before 1970.

I found it strange when sometimes I'd be invited to dinner at the Sullivan's home – just me, with my mother. But then, when I was about ten, Uncle Al invited me to attend a dinner at the Waldorf Astoria in his honor. He was receiving a medal from the Poetry Society of America and becoming its President. He was offering me a window into a world which previously I'd only imagined.

When I was 14, A.M. Sullivan released his collection of poems about science. I kept a framed print of the title stanza on my wall for many years.



“Stars and atoms
have no size.
They only vary
in men's eyes.”

In later years, I kept a copy of A.M. Sullivan's philosophies on business management in my top drawer at the office.

The Sullivan daughters, our cousins Mary Rose and Catherine (who had helped us play “Manhattan Merry-Go-Round”) were older than us Menendez kids, yet still always close with my sisters. The four girls spent summers together at Uncle Al's property in the woods, where he did much of his writing on nature.



(Pat, Mary Rose, Mary, Mom, Catherine & Aunt Catherine)

When cousin Catherine grew up, she lived her life as a performer and artist in Greenwich Village. She created her own cabaret shows. She also dedicated herself to preserving and promoting the legacy of her father's poetry.

Here are cousins
Mary Rose and
Catherine as children
with our grandmother,
Mary McNamee
(née Fitzhenry).

(My mother's mother.)

Mary McNamee would create beautiful charcoal landscapes in the Hudson River style. And every summer she would make an entirely new wardrobe for my mother and Aunt Catherine before they visited their favorite uncle, her brother Peter Fitzhenry.



Uncle Pete seemed to have a few enterprises going but none more profitable than the beer pub which he and his wife Mame had inherited from her family. It was across the street from a factory.

“There was a round hole in the middle of the bar and all the money went down it!”

Fittingly, he became Water Commissioner in town and later a State Representative.

The Fitzhenrys and the McNamees came over from Ireland on the same boat in 1844. The two families met in the middle of the Atlantic. My grandmother Mary was just an infant when my grandfather, Edward (who was 7), famously held her in his arms.

The two families settled in Bridgeport Connecticut. And growing up together on Church Lane, Mary Fitzhenry and Edward McNamee were eventually (and fatefully) married.



(Catherine Fitzhenry & Edward McNamee,
Aunt Catherine & my mother)

We don't know much more about the McNamee side of the family but my grandmother's parents were Michael Fitzhenry from County Roscommon and Margret Joyce from Clonmore Village in County Tipperary.

It's safe to say we're 100% Irish on my mother's side.



Going back just one more generation, the chart below is helpful.

Keep in mind, they arrived in New York City before Ellis Island or the Statue of Liberty and would have been processed through the Castle Garden Emigrant Landing Depot at Battery Park.

(great, great)

Nicholas Fitzhenry
(m) Nancy Kinsella

(great)

Michael Fitzhenry
(m) Margaret Joyce

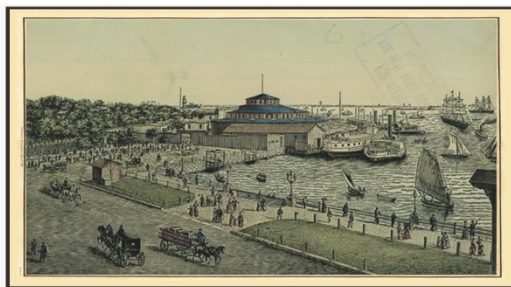
(grand)

Mary Fitzhenry (siblings: Peter & Kate)
(m) Edward McNamee

(parents)

Mary Cecila McNamee (siblings: Catherine & * Edward)
(m) James Rupert Menendez

Me (siblings: Jim, Patricia & Mary)



* My mother's brother, Edward, died as a young boy. She never spoke about it.

Still, how did my mother ever wind up in St. Albans where she could eventually meet my father?



(This was
my parents'
wedding day.)

My Mom's family (the McNamees) uprooted from Connecticut to West Orange, New Jersey. There, Aunt Catherine met, and married Uncle Al and the young couple moved in with my grandparents. Not long after that, my grandfather, Edward McNamee, passed away suddenly, leaving Uncle Al as the sole bread winner. (This is all before his career at Dun & Bradstreet.)

In crisis, Al took a job selling new homes in St. Albans and part of the arrangement was that he had to live in the development. Naturally, Aunt Catherine, my grandmother, and my mother all moved to Queens with him.

Oddly, my father's story is quite similar. In his case, his younger sister Florinda married someone who was building new homes in St. Albans and he eventually followed her there.



Even as children, Aunt Flo and my father were the closest of the seven Menendez offspring.

(Not pictured: Raymond, John & Nieves as well as Faustino and Catherine who both died in infancy.)

* Both of my parents had siblings who died as young children. Though it was not uncommon in those days, I

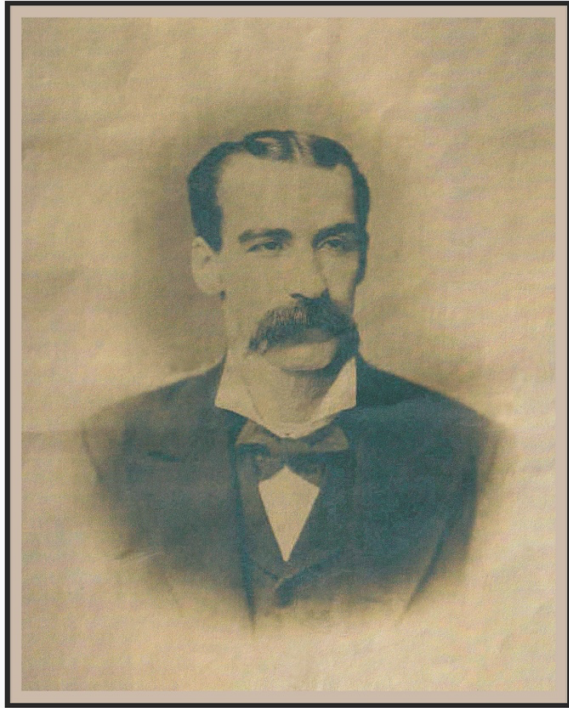
wonder if it was something which brought them together.

My father also lost his mother at a tender age. He was only 13 when Jermina Maria Young fell from her horse, hitting her breast on the blade of a plowshare. Gangrene set in, and after two years – which involved moving to Brooklyn to be closer to medical care – she succumbed to causes related to that infection.

She was only 44. It was 1900 and now her husband would have to manage alone with their five surviving children.



This is my father's father, Ramon Menéndez of Pravia, Spain.



He was born May 8th, 1842.

His family were large landowners in a small cluster of towns in the Asturias province of northern Spain, where the Menéndez name is quite prominent and to be found everywhere.

Ramon walked away from a very sizable inheritance and legacy to seek out a new path for himself.



Though he was destined for New York City, he first spent several years in Havana, Cuba.

We know from Ramon's obituary that he fought in the "Civil Wars" there. And from a first-hand account, we feel certain that he fought for the Spanish Army. This would place Ramon in the Ten Years' War, the first of three liberation conflicts which Cuba fought against Spain (1868-1878).

We also know that beyond his time of service, he stayed on in Havana to learn and master the trade of cigar making with an intention of taking it to America, which he did. But not before his brothers joined him in Cuba, on their own path to America.



Ramon arrived in Brooklyn, New York in the mid-1870s and set up a small cigar making operation which he called The Factory.

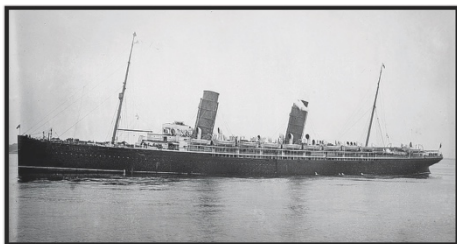
Though there would be other cigar-related enterprises and other Brooklyn addresses over the next 30 years, by 1877 Ramon had married Jermina and established the family farm on Long Island where my father was raised.

Jermina would give birth seven times over the next 16 years:

Faustino (1879–1880)
Catherine (1881–1882)
Raymond (1883–1945)
James Rupert (1885–1965)
John (1888–1943)
Florinda (1891–1980)
Nieves (1895–1979)

All of the Menéndez children were born in New York, with the exception of Nieves, who was born in Spain.

In 1895, Ramon booked passage for his entire family on this Cunard ocean liner to Europe, determined to make a claim on his family inheritance back in Pravia.



With four children in tow (including my father who was 10), they travelled through Liverpool, over the English Channel, and across the continent

by train and carriage. A journey which must have taken many months because they returned with five children, according to the passenger re-entry log at Ellis Island.

In the end, Ramon's application for title to his land was denied. The government ruled that he would need to reside within the country to re-establish ownership. He chose not to do so, wanting instead to raise his family as Americans in the United States. A fateful decision, at least for me.

While there, they visited many relatives in those surrounding towns where the Menéndez name was so prominent. It is unlikely that my great-grandfather Bernardo (for whom I was named) was still alive. He would have been 94. Perhaps it was Bernardo's passing which prompted the trip.

In Pravia's sister-village of Peñauarán, our branch of the Menéndez family dates back to 1725 and its modern-day ancestors are still there, living in a 10-structure compound, according to one cousin who visited.

He was told that by taking the first record of our family from the San Andrés Cemetery in Pravia to a particular Catholic church in Avilés, that our line could be traced back to the 7th Century!

It has also been passed down to us (through the ages) that we are direct descendants of the most celebrated Menéndez of all, the admiral and explorer from the port town of Avilés, Pedro.

(1519 - 1574)

Pedro Menéndez de Avilés



(great)

Bernardo Menéndez
(m) Ramona Sargos



(grand)

Ramon Menéndez (3 brothers)
(m) Jermina Young



(parents)

James Rupert Menéndez
(m) Mary Cecila McNamee



Me (Jim, Patricia & Mary)



Pedro Menéndez de Avilés

His first voyage to
Havana, Cuba in 1554

As Captain-General of the Fleet of the Indies, Pedro Menéndez established the first Trans-Atlantic convoy called the Spanish Treasure Fleet. In doing so, he surveyed and established the building of all the major Caribbean ports including Havana. Later in 1565, he founded the town of St. Augustine, Florida and served as Florida's first Governor for nine years.

Ramon brought his wife and children to Avilés to show them Pedro's statue before embarking on the long voyage home with their 2-month-old girl, Nieves Maria Clotilda Celestina.



Ramon & Nieves on the farm
near Huntington, Long Island.

Having lost two baby girls in the past must have made their trip a nerve-wracking experience but they made it. Nieves lived to be 84 years old.

Sadly though, it was only a few years after their return that my father's mother, Jermina, had her accident.

Jermina barely outlived her own mother, Catherine Catalina Young (née Dugan). We have even less information about her father, James Haime Young.

Most importantly, we know that they both emigrated from Ireland some time before 1857 to live on 26th Street in Brooklyn.

And that is the long story of how my siblings, and I came to be 75% Irish, 25% Castilian Spanish, (110% Catholic), and living in St. Albans.

One day I came home and announced to my parents that I wanted to leave the nuns and the school at St. Catherine's behind and attend a public school for junior high – a specific school just outside of town.

Shimer, as it was called, had much smaller classes and each grade was divided into 6 developmental levels so you could (theoretically) progress from year to year.

It was a bus ride. It was a gamble. Everyone was new. I thrived!

I became involved with The Student Guard and was made one of its several Lieutenants. It was the job of The Guard to ensure orderly entry of the students into the building. We'd blow our whistles out in the yard and line-up the grades by section or level. My classmate, Joe Greene, also became a Lieutenant. Joe and I were interested in the same things.



Joe is in the middle row, all the way to the left.

The next year when it became time to select a new Captain of The Guard, the two natural candidates, myself and Joe, were summoned by Mr. McConnell, the teacher who ran things.

I still recall, quite vividly, how Mr. McConnell leaned intently across the table, looking only at Joe but while pointing at me and said, “I’ve made my decision about who will be in charge this year. And I’ve picked Ed.”

“Geez, why did he pick me?” was my immediate thought. There was no rationale for it. And I might not have thought twice about it, had it not been for his manner which felt so jarring. Afterall, if he had picked Joe to be Captain, it wouldn’t have bothered me a bit. Still, I couldn’t help feeling then, as I do now, that I’d just been witness to an unjust act.

In that small moment, I became newly and intensely aware of – what they now call – the unconscious bias which must have been taking place all around me throughout my entire life. As a young boy you’re an innocent. You accept the circumstances around you as being how things are. But now I was seeing things as how they were for Joe.

We were a good team. One time we stopped a riot in the lunchroom! And we both moved up in student government. I became Magistrate of the Student Court; Joe was Vice-President and we represented Shimer at the borough-wide Queens Council Fair.



(Me, Joe, Miss Mober, Principal Wallstine & other Officers.)

Even though I'd left St. Catherine of Sienna for academics, I was allowed to remain marching with their Junior Brigade.



I liked the idea of maintaining connections with girls and friends (but mostly girls) from my own neighborhood and background. Not only that but we were very good, and we got to march down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan every year in the big St. Patrick's Day Parade!



Father Feeney (in the priest's collar) was a sharp deal maker who sought out organizations to provide for our instruments, uniforms and transportation.

We rode in military transports arranged by The Knights of Columbus in exchange for performing at their events.

Next to him is Monsignor Chartist, the man who'd brought my parents together with a well-placed suggestion to my father over a card game! Thank you, Monsignor.

And in band uniform to his left is Mr. Bishop, our Music Instructor. I played the bass drum. I couldn't tell you whether that made his task any easier or more difficult.

