

1905 PROFILE

Deirdre Mellane, having finally made the decision to emigrate to America, settled in Boston, Massachusetts, as a servant in the home of a wealthy family.

Life at Home

- By the time Dee Mellane made her final decision to leave Ireland and journey to America, her community in County Mayo was depleted.
- So many young people had left Mayo for a better life, it was no longer a custom to stage an "American wake"—a farewell celebration to mark the passage of an Irish person to America.
- For more than 50 years, Irish men and women had been leaving the poverty of Ireland for the promise of America; most never returned.
- Dee was even forced to walk to the train station by herself since her brothers had already left for America and her sisters were angry that she was leaving, too.
- For the last decade, Irish women had been emigrating in such large numbers, more women than men were leaving Ireland, the only emigrant group in which this was the case.
- Irish women were in demand as servants, a better paying job than most men could find.
- In Ireland women had few opportunities for employment; even marriage held almost no prospects for women, since relatively few men possessed the dowry required for claiming a bride.
- Since the 1840s the Irish had been fleeing their homeland in large numbers, most with hopes of improving their condition, while retaining grateful recollections of the land they left.
- Ireland was still home to them, and held strong ties to their affection.
- Dee, at 19 years old, had come to her decision to emigrate late.
- For more than a year she had been engaged to a local farmer whose work habits and lack of luck prevented him from raising a dowry.
- Recently, against the advice of her mother and sisters, she called the wedding off and announced she was leaving for America.



Deirdre left Ireland to work for a wealthy family in Boston.

"Fighting Tuberculosis," *The Youth's Companion*, March 18, 1909:

It has always been recognized that in warfare, knowledge of the enemy's weak points confers immense tactical advantage. This was never truer than in the tremendous crusade that mankind is banding together to wage against the dread foe, tuberculosis.

A few decades ago this particular enemy of the human race was not believed to have any vulnerable spots. It was thought by all to be invincible, and its mere touch meant death. Then it was gradually discovered that, after all, certain weapons were at hand by means of which mankind could give fight; that before sunlight, fresh air and proper food this foe would recoil like Mephistopheles before the crucifix.

Then, little by little, the fight was begun. By example and precept people were taught not to lie down and die, but to stand up and fight for themselves.

The good news was taken to the tenements and crowded parts of great cities, where sunshine and fresh air are not secured without a struggle, but where they are just as efficacious as in the haunts of wealth.

The great free exhibits given by the International Tuberculosis Exhibition are of immense value in this educational crusade; the charity that takes the form of paying car fares in order that the poor of the tenements may not miss this invaluable object lesson is a very real one. Here the mother who is trying to save her stricken child in two small rooms of the tenement district is shown those two rooms as they probably are and as they may be. In the first instance dirty, cluttered up with the useless rubbish, with every crack through which air may filter carefully stuffed with unclean rags. Then side-by-side with this picture, the same rooms cleaned and purified, with windows which will open wide and stay open, and with nothing in sight that cannot be made clean and kept clean.

The great lesson is taught in capital letters and comfort in stuffiness are not synonymous terms; that whitewash is a thousand times better than an ancient, germ-laden wallpaper, it can be applied by anyone, and as often as is desirable; that a floor that can be washed daily with soap and water feels better and looks better than the same floor covered with scraps of microbe-infested carpet; and that sanitary receptacles can be had for the asking, which make it possible to expectorate without endangering the lives of the whole family.

It would be well indeed if these exhibitions could be taken in every town and village in the country.

"Crowding Ellis Island, Record Breaking Immigration Taxes Bureau's Resources," *The New York Times*, April 13, 1902:

Within the last six weeks the quarters of the Immigration Bureau on Ellis Island have been taxed to their utmost for the first time since they were established there. The number of foreigners who arrived here in March was 59,000, or 23,000 more than the total number of immigrants to this port during the whole of last year. If the present rate of immigration continues through the year more than 300,000 people will have been accommodated on the island before next January.

The chances are that the immigration of the year will be greater than any year since 1882, and the number of newcomers will equal, if not exceed, the total number of steamship arrivals for four of the years since 1892. Last Monday night 1,498 immigrants slept on the island, more than have ever been there overnight. During six weekdays within the last fortnight the men and women accommodated were 3,000 and more each day, a one-day 6,000 passed inspection during the 12 hours succeeding 7 a.m.



A large staff of servants was not uncommon for many upper class Boston families.

- When she was finally persuaded to stay, she received a letter from her cousin in Boston asking her emigrate and work in the home of a wealthy family.
- Then she decided to go.
- Under the proposal, her passage would be paid in advance by the family who was eager to hire another Irish girl to help tend their four children and serve meals.
- Irish servants knew their place, the letter said, and were easier to manage despite their Catholic upbringing.
- A slowing of the Irish immigration had created a tight labor market in Boston among the upper class, who typically needed half a dozen or more servants to maintain their homes.
- It wasn't the life Dee had anticipated, but she hoped to be luckier in love in America than she had been in Ireland.
- She was hired after three Welch women quit all at once and moved to New York City where salaries were higher.

Life at Work

- Dee's biggest surprise on her first day at work was not the size of the house or the sound of a water closet being flushed, but the presence of dogs inside the house.
- In Ireland dogs were used for herding, hunting and protection, and were expected to live outside.
- In America, even the dogs lived a life of luxury.
- The Vale family's three rambunctious terriers were allowed in every part of the house and were even taken for walks instead of simply being turned out when they became a nuisance.
- But that was not Dee's only surprise.
- Even the sunlight and smells of Boston seemed to be different from her native Ireland.
- At first she thought it was the burning of so much coal in the close area that created the difference, but slowly she came to realize that light, especially early morning light, was different in Boston.
- This realization was disquieting and sparked a serious case of homesickness within days of arrival.
- When she first arrived, she was provided with dresses for every occasion celebrated within the home, including toilettries in a linen handkerchief so fine she wept.
- As a live-in maid, the hours were long—17 hours—but at least she was warm and well fed.
- Her work day began at 5:30 a.m., when she cleaned the kitchen floors and heated the water.
- By 6:30 a.m., she woke the more senior staff and helped light the fires in the eight fireplaces located throughout the house.
- Next, she prepared the other servants' breakfast and delivered breakfast to the upstairs maid, who worked in the nursery.
- By 7:30 a.m., she was appropriately dressed in morning attire and assigned the responsibility of carrying jugs of water upstairs to the children; during the same trip she took away the chamber pots that had become full during the night.
- Chamber pots were emptied and replaced three or four times during the day; in addition, some of the senior servants had their own chamber pots, although most relieved themselves in an outhouse located behind the back kitchen.
- The servants' breakfast was at 7:45 a.m., followed by morning prayer services using a Protestant liturgy in the parlor with the lord and lady of the house and their four children.



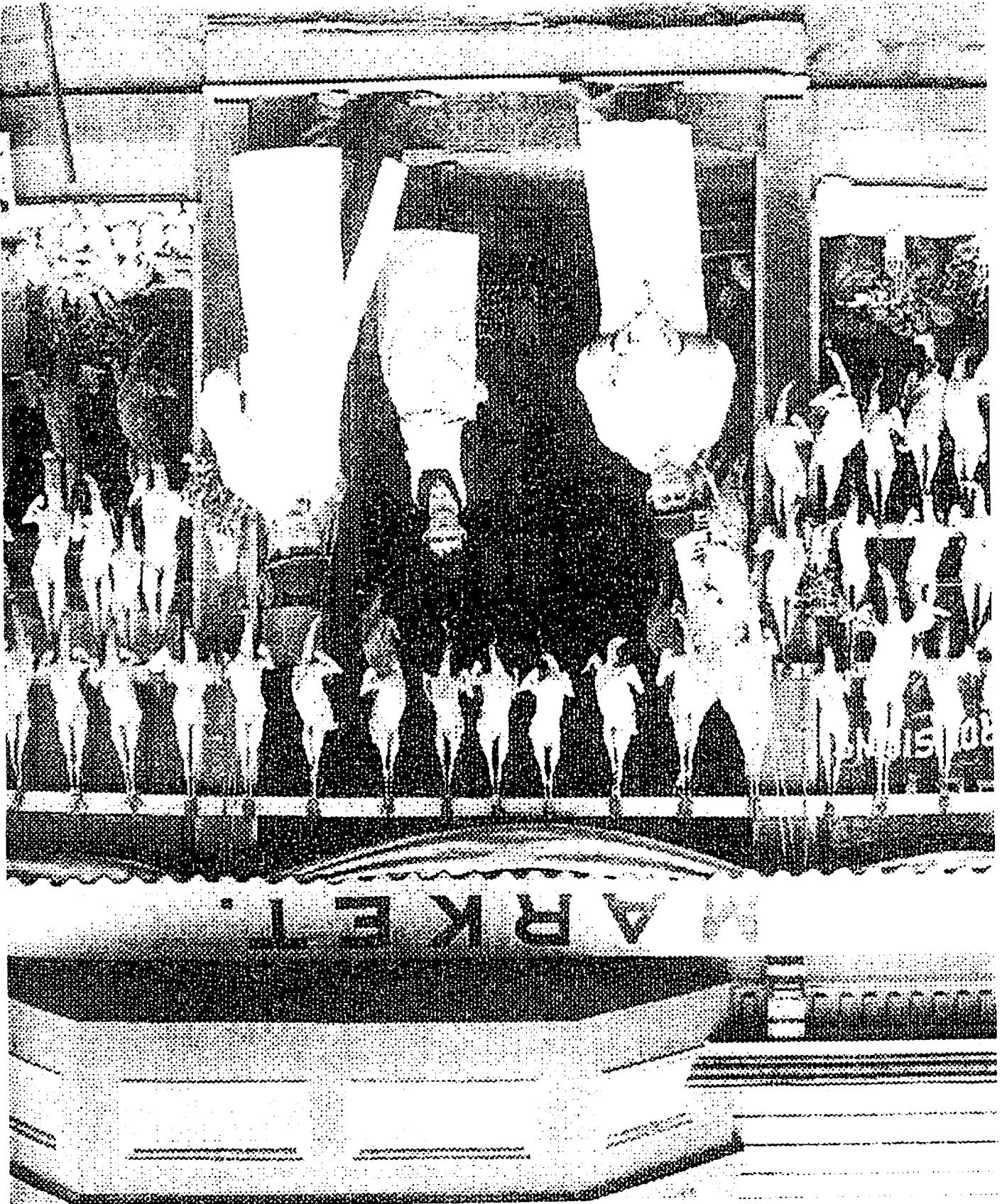
Deirdre's workday began at 5:30 am when she cleaned the floors.

- The family breakfast then ensued, followed by cleanup, which could take up to an hour depending on the number of serving dishes used that day.
- Dee then took a short break to change her dress and then began to assist with the cleanup on the main floor of the house, which was covered from stern to stern with souvenirs from numerous trips along the East Coast and throughout Europe.
- In the library, a special display of seashells from around the world had been created, complete with labels that named the shells and gave their scientific designation, date of collection and location.
- Dee learned early that even commenting on a shell would evoke long, elaborate tales about where it came from and the circumstances under which it was discovered.
- At times the stories felt like extended lectures; at other times the wonderful tales of world travel made her feel like she was part of a wealthy and influential family.
- At 1 p.m., lunch was served; Dee and the other servants wore black dresses and white aprons which were always clean and well starched.
- After lunch ended at 2:30 p.m., Dee was free to nap or walk.
- Strolling through Boston listening to the sounds of a modern city excited her.
- And the prospect of romance occupied her thoughts.
- Her daydreams were often filled with a good, hard-working Irish boy picking her out of the crowd, courting her in a proper manner and proposing marriage, while her wealthy employers begged her to stay on.
- In her well-rehearsed daydream, her suitor was also handsome and articulate, with eyes that sparkled with a deep passion.
- Boston was a city endowed with many good-looking Irish boys; the question was, How would she properly entertain one when her mother and sisters were back in Ireland?
- After all, she could hardly expect to use her employer's fancy parlor for entertaining male suitors.
- Several days a week, normally when guests were in the house, the family celebrated high tea at 4:30 p.m.
- Otherwise, Dee was well occupied by 6 p.m., setting the long, custom-made mahogany table for dinner, which was normally served at 7 p.m.
- Dinner preparation included arranging the elaborately embroidered table linen, which required three servants to do properly.
- Dinner, of course, always required formal dress by the family and servants.
- During the first month she was in the home, changing clothes five times a day was exciting, but the ritual quickly lost its glitter.
- Unlike the chance to play with the children.
- In America, wealthy children were expected to play and were given dozens of toys toward that end.
- Dee was fascinated by the tiny carts, twirling tops and elaborate puzzles that the children owned, and by their willingness to share the joy of playing with them.
- Most evenings, dinner was over by 9 p.m., when she and the rest of the servants would eat their final meal of the day before retiring at 10 p.m.
- Her meals often mirrored those eaten by the family, and she was delighted to savor the sweetness of an orange on her first day at work.
- She discovered that the orange skins, when covered by a cloth, could retain their smell for weeks.
- After that, an orange symbolized all that was new and different about America, and why it might become her permanent home.



Dierdre was fascinated by the privilege enjoyed by children of wealthy families in America.

Many Irish immigrants were hardworking merchants.



Life in the Community: Boston, Massachusetts

- Anyone who knew anything about Boston told Dee that she was privileged to work on the South Side in one of its many fine homes.
- There, too, could be found the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, the largest church in New England.
- The interior was grand, she thought, divided by lines of bronzed pillars which upheld a lofty clerestory and an open timber roof.
- The chancel was very deep, and contained a rich and costly altar, and the great organ, at the other end of the church, was one of the best instruments in the country.
- The chancel's stained-glass windows depicted the Crucifixion, Nativity, and Ascension, and the transept windows, each of which covered 800 square feet, represented the Finding of the True Cross, and the Exaltation of the Cross by the Emperor Heraclius, after its recovery from the Persians.
- But Dee quickly discovered there was little in Boston of which Bostonians were more truly proud than the Common and the Public Garden.
- Other cities had larger and more elaborate public grounds, but none of them, she was repeatedly told, could boast a park of greater natural beauty.
- Everything, they said, was "of the plainest and homeliest character, the velvety greensward and the overarching foliage being the sufficient ornaments of the place."
- Dee especially enjoyed the Frog Pond with its fountain, where boys sailed their miniature ships.
- Also, on one of the little hills near the Frog Pond, was the elaborate soldiers' and sailors' monument.
- All the malls and paths were shaded by fine old trees, which formerly had their names conspicuously labeled upon them, giving an admirable opportunity for the study of grand botany.
- Near the Public Garden was the Boston Public Library, one of the most beneficent institutions that had been conceived by the public-spirited and liberal citizens of Boston.
- The immense collection constituting this library was valuable not only because of the variety and number of volumes it contained, but because of its accessibility.
- The library was open to all, and no one who made use of its offerings was charged.
- If a book not in the library was requested, it was ordered and the inquirer notified when it arrived.
- Generous donations by many wealthy and large-hearted men and women from time to time swelled the permanent fund of the institution to upwards of \$100,000.
- Large additions to the general library were made yearly, and it numbered more than 450,000 volumes and over 200,000 pamphlets.
- The annual circulation amounted to about 1.3 million separate issues and thus was superior in number of volumes to the Library of Congress.



Bostonians were proud of their open space and many spent leisure time enjoying the outdoors.

Irish Immigration Timeline

1776

Men of Irish birth or descent formed between one-third to one-half of the American Revolutionary forces, including 1,492 officers and 26 generals.

1790

The first census of the United States recorded 44,000 Irish-born residents, more than half of whom lived south of Pennsylvania.

1791

Irishman James Hoban designed the White House, modeled upon Leinster House in Dublin.

1798

When a revolutionary uprising by the Society of United Irishmen was quelled by the British, many of the Society's members elected to emigrate to the United States.

1801

The Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland abolished the Irish legislature and created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

1820-1830

Irish immigrants numbering 50,000 entered the United States.

1829

The Emancipation Act lifted penalties for Catholics and Presbyterians in Ireland.

1830-1840

Irish immigrants numbering 237,000 entered the United States.

1838

Poor Relief for Ireland was enacted.

1840-1850

The Great Famine forced more than one million Irish men and women to emigrate.

1840-1850

Irish immigrants numbering 800,000 entered the United States.

1846

All of Ireland was mapped for the first time.

1852

The Tenement Act provided for a uniform evaluation of property for tax purposes in Ireland.

1868

The Irish Reform Bill passed in British Parliament, which allowed a million more men the right to vote.

1870

The Irish Land Act provided protection for tenants.