


*Frank Quinn Remembers:
Irish Oral History of the Mission District*

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he Chilean novelist Isabel Allende describes San Francisco's Mission District as a "cradle of interlocking lives," in which a mosaic of ethnic identities have coexisted since the Ohlone Indians ceded their settlement to Spanish colonists in the eighteenth century. The rich and colorful life of historian Frank Quinn, who was born and raised in the Mission District when it was a prodigal center of Irish-American culture, is a vivid microcosm of Allende's hypothesis. Although his primary career was in city government, his secondary avocation as an oral historian saw him devote over four decades of his life to archival and genealogical research of the Bay Area's Irish community, its settlement patterns, as well as its mosaic of celebrated luminaries, both social and political. A visit to his home in the Sunset began with a carefully indexed family tree whose period photos extended over generations of Quinns, Lannergans, and McDonnells and a cultural journey which stretched from the shores of post-Famine Conamara and the tenant farms of the Golden Vale to the lumber yards of Northern California. Icons revealing their umbilical links with the "old country" occupied pride of place beside family keepsakes in Quinn's front room, while the smell of freshly brewed tea from the kitchen proclaimed the opening scene in an age-old ritual of Irish hospitality. Both Frank and his wife Jessica Quinn were warm hospitable people, unpretentious about their gifts of folk memory and astute in their perceptions of the changes which have affected Irish-American life since their childhood in the 1920s.

Quinn's story began long before the 1906 earthquake focused world attention on San Francisco. Its genesis lies in the pasture lands of Cork's Golden Vale in a social milieu dominated by the Longuevilles and the St. Legers and immortalized in the drawing room prose of Elizabeth

*The author wishes to thank the Quinn family for their hospitality and for their permission to quote from Frank's book *Memories of Old San Francisco: Growing Up in the Mission District* (San Francisco Archives Publication No. 4, 1985). Frank Quinn died in October 2003.

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Bowen. Frank's father, Timothy Andrew Quinn, was born in the townland of Knockeenacurrag, close to the village of Kiskeam outside Mallow in North Cork, on 16 October 1885. The last of a family of nine, Timothy Quinn grew up in a household which had contributed its own share to the struggle for tenant proprietorship. His father had been a Land League activist during the 1870s, a family penchant which was not lost on Timothy Quinn's older brothers in the following decades. In a colonial cocoon of high-walled estates, lorded over by a resolute aristocracy and ceded eventually to land-hungry grazers, the opportunities available to the sons and daughters of small tenant farmers were hardly encouraging. Leaving his oldest brother to occupy the family farm on what was once an immense Longueville estate, Timothy Quinn headed for Queenstown in 1908 and immigrated to the United States. He eventually made his way to California where he found work as a lumberjack in the Feather River country. Six years afterwards, on 13 September 1914, he married Catherine McDonnell, a legal stenographer, whose grandfather Alexander McDonnell had immigrated from Magh Iorrus in the Conamara Gaeltacht in 1850. Timothy Quinn and Catherine McDonnell first met at a dance organized by the Knights of the Red Branch, which enjoyed the patronage of young Irish Americans during the early 1900s. The building which housed the Knights functioned as a social and cultural center for Irish communities in the Mission District and still stands today on Mission Street between 7th and 8th Streets.

Earning three dollars a day at Allen and Dettman lumber dealers on Islais Creek Channel, Timothy Quinn was considered to be well off by Irish working-class standards. Marriage, however, marked the end of Catherine McDonnell's paralegal career. The traditional social and economic mores of the day, which placed strict barriers between marriage and female employees, decreed that Catherine would now "settle down" to her new role as housewife and mother. It was in her family's three-storied Victorian house on Howard Street that Frank Quinn was born on 5 June 1915.

Frank recalled that his grandparents' seven-room flat was a spacious place, with ten-foot high ceilings and rooms which were filled with sunshine. The building contained a store at street level while upstairs the seven-room flat consisted of a parlor, three bedrooms, a dining room, a large pantry, and a kitchen where his grandmother cooked the family meals on a wood and coal stove. Howard Street, where he spent the first years of his life, was once an avenue of well-to-do merchant and professional families, but like most young families anxious to establish their independence, the Quinns moved to new quarters on 24th Street in early 1918. Young Frank's new surroundings added further to his growing skills of social observation.

Three-quarters of a century later, he retained vivid recollections of the corner stores, bustling street life, theaters, and door-to-door delivery men that constituted one of the busiest shopping districts west of Chicago. "We always took a walk down Mission Street. It did not

matter that Mission Street ran north or south. The walk was always *down*. And as far as we were concerned, Mission Street ran from 16th Street to Army Street. This eleven-block stretch of commerce was alive with people both by day and by night. For us there was never a need to venture downtown, for every need could be satisfied on Mission Street.” Frank’s memory retained litanies of Mission Street furniture stores (Lachman Bros. and Redlick-Newman’s), jewelry stores (Granat Bros. and Aubert’s Diamond Palaces), clothing stores (Columbia Outfitting Company and the Majestic Clothing Store), and an inordinate number of mortuaries, which he could reel off as if they were still just next door.

For theater enthusiasts, the Mission District was a mecca of stage shows and vaudeville delights in the early 1900s. In the days before the movies, live stage performances were the order of the day at the Roxie, the Cameo, and the Grand Old Victoria. Quinn recalled that the Wigwam Theater on Mission Street was one of the first in the district to feature motion pictures which were accompanied by an organist by day and an orchestra by night. “On Saturday afternoons, the Wigwam offered Uncle Eddie’s Show which appealed to children. One stunt I remember was when Uncle Eddie brought children to the stage and had them eat crackers. The first child to whistle after consuming the soda and crackers won a prize.”

The Roaring Twenties reached their zenith in the Mission District with the opening of the 3,500-seat El Capitan Theater in 1929. This magnificent building offered live stage acts as well as motion pictures. The Saturday afternoon show at El Capitan was the high point of the week for Quinn, who recalled the names of its emcees, chorus girls, and performers with the same enthusiasm as a Hollywood buff of today. “Going to the movies on Saturday afternoon was *de rigueur* for us. That was the day on which the serial was presented. The serial motion picture was a thriller. Presented in chapters, from week to week, each chapter ending with the hero or the girl in some impossible situation from which there seemed to be no escape. The film lured us back, week after week, to see how that perilous problem was solved.”

Frank Quinn attended high school in the Mission District during the Depression era when extra money for entertainment was a rare line item in most young Irish families. However, schoolboy imaginations were not always found lacking when faced with deficits. Quinn recalled that “the theater demanded an admission fee, and our financial situation found us woefully lacking in the price of admission. On a balmy summer night, three of us made our way to the stage door alley of the El Capitan Theater off Capp Street. Our plan was to loiter in the alley, where there was an exit door from the theater. If we were lucky, a patron exiting from the show would provide us with the means of dashing inside. We would simply take advantage of the opened door and ignore the patron, and hope that no vigilant usher was nearby.”

In 1921, at the venerable age of six, Frank Quinn started school at St. Peter’s on Alabama Street, which was run by the Irish Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy. Both orders en-

joyed a considerable reputation as educators at home in Ireland and among Irish communities overseas. In the pedantic scholarly atmosphere of St. Peter's, Quinn recalled that most of the nuns and brothers were either "Irish or pro-Irish." In a milieu where Irish republicanism was reinforced by flamboyant notables like Eamon de Valera and Father Peter Yorke, it was hardly surprising that in the Irish classrooms of the Mission—while the War of Independence raged back home—declarations of patriotism were extolled with pride, even by youngsters. Quinn's first venture into the world of political oratory came when he was a six-year-old schoolboy in St. Peter's when he gave a dramatic recitation of a poem detailing the daring rescue of six Fenian prisoners from an English penal colony in Australia. "Imagine a six-year-old freckle-faced redhead boy reciting: 'My ship is manned by Yankee tars and I'll sail her to hell with her jib-boom afire.' The result of my impassioned oratory was that the nun secured another nun to take charge of the class and, led by her, I went from classroom to classroom reciting my poem."

During the 1920s, Quinn's father was a member of several Irish societies in San Francisco, especially the Rebel Cork Society whose ranks were filled by hundreds of his countrymen (some of whom had refused to recognize the Irish Free State government in the wake of the Civil War). Accordingly, the Quinns enjoyed many of the social events which these societies organized, not least their Irish picnics and pageants which were held in Shellmound Park in Oakland. The Easter Rising of 1916 electrified Irish people throughout the United States. As far west as California, it was reenacted in Shellmound Park by military-style cadet units from the Bay Area's Irish societies. Although Frank Quinn was still young enough to take the "casualties" for real, he remembered, "The grandstand of the racetrack became the General Post Office. Men in civilian attire became the rebels couching defiantly behind make-believe walls. British troops, dressed in military uniforms, assailed the rebels' position. With my father holding me by the hand, I watched the mock war. I heard the crack of rifle fire. I saw British troops advance relentlessly. I saw them fall dead on the field. I witnessed the dead being carted off the field. Then, I saw the white flag raised and witnessed the Irish surrender."

While a new Ireland was unfurling six thousand miles away, the "Roaring Twenties" and the "Hungry Thirties" were set to leave a very different imprint on San Francisco's Irish communities. From 1919 to 1933, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution prohibited the sale of intoxicating liquor. The period was marked by an open contempt for the law and the inevitable closing of legalized saloons. The latter were replaced by camouflaged illegal establishments known as blind pigs, or speakeasies, where liquor was sold openly. Fronted by legitimate-looking grocery stores or tobacco shops, these blind pigs operated brazenly throughout San Francisco and especially the Mission District during Frank Quinn's youth. He recalled, "As a teenager, I had no difficulty in getting into these flourishing blind pigs although I did not drink. A shot of moonshine went for twenty-five cents—a shot being an ounce. As the depres-

sion of the 1930s deepened and money grew more scarce, the price in my neighborhood dropped to two shots a quarter.”

When the Quinns moved to a new flat on the corner of 24th Street and Alabama during the depression, they found that their new quarters were above a thriving blind pig. This location led to a cozy business arrangement with the resident bootlegger, who agreed to pay half the family’s rent in return for liquor storage space in their kitchen pantry. The well-hatched plan, however, was not altogether beyond the bounds of the law. Frank remembered,

He was no bother to us. He simply would enter the kitchen by the back steps, take what he needed from the pantry, and be on his way. This clever situation insured the bootlegger against loss of his stock should he be raided either by the police or by the prohibition agents—more popularly known as Pro-Highs. One afternoon, when I was in grammar school, I came home by the back of our building. There was noise from the back of the flat, and I smelled a dreadful odor. When I got upstairs, I looked out the bedroom window to the narrow alleyway below and realized immediately what was taking place. The Pro-Highs had raided the bootlegger. They were busily engaged in destroying his stock in trade by smashing bottle after bottle on the unyielding concrete of the alleyway. I shall never forget the crashing of glass on pavement and the odor of that liquor. Our pantry was not touched however. The value of the arrangement was proven in the end.

Prohibition, he said, “made lawbreakers of many of us in that long-gone era that was legally dry but actually as wet as wet could be. Ignoring and flaunting the dry laws was a popular pastime. It even reached into the home. Many people took to brewing beer in the home. We were no exception.”

While Quinn’s disclosure of certain “home industries” during Prohibition may suggest that the Mission District was a law unto itself, nothing could be further from the truth. During the 1920s and 1930s, the San Francisco Police Department was a bastion of first- and second-generation Irish. He recalled that they ruled the streets of the Mission District with an iron hand and were as apt to don the role of good Samaritan and social worker as they were the role of law enforcer whenever the occasion arose. Unlike Chicago, the streets of San Francisco during Prohibition were controlled as much by the collective mentality of Irish immigrant mores as they were by the lawmakers in City Hall. The following episode, in Quinn’s own words, is a case in point:

This woman went up to a cop on the beat in 24th Street and she said, “My husband went into so-and-so’s blind pig across the street, and he spent his entire week’s wages of \$35, and I want to get it back.” So the policeman caught her by the arm and walked across the street and went into the blind pig. He went right up to the owner and said, “This lady’s husband (he named him) was in here, and he spent his entire paycheck of thirty-five dollars here.” And the proprietor said “No! He spent some money here, but he was already drunk when he came in.” The policeman said, “Give her thirty-five dollars.” The proprietor turned around, hit the cash register and put \$35 on the bar. The cop wanted no trouble on his beat. They kept this town as clean as could be during

Prohibition. You had no Chicago-style gangsters here. You could walk anyplace by night and have no fear of being robbed or mugged.

The 1930s were bleak years in America. As the shock of the Wall Street Stock Market Crash resounded across the country, fifteen-year-old Frank Quinn entered the grim world of commerce first as newspaper boy (selling the *San Francisco Call* on the corner of 18th and Folsom Streets) and later on as a butcher's boy in the Mission District. His workday at the meat market began taking orders before school. He returned in the afternoon to make deliveries in a 1927 Model T Ford and helped with the ritual of closing, "scraping the blocks, washing counters, raking sawdust, putting meat into the ice box, and generally getting the place ready for the morning. My wages were nine dollars a week. That was more than the going rate for a butcher boy."

As Roosevelt's New Deal unfurled feebly among a depressed and aggravated populace, Quinn graduated from St. Peter's High School in the Mission District. He was seventeen. It was May 1933, and the prospects of finding work were nil. He recalled,

Men and women were being laid off from work at an alarming rate. It was an exercise in futility to search for work. Wherever I went, it was the same old story: "Kid, we're going to lay off so many employees this weekend." Local charities stepped into the breach, but their resources soon proved to be inadequate as the number of unemployed grew and grew. It was President Roosevelt's swift action that gave hope to those out of work. The Works Progress Administration and other government agencies created public works jobs that paid men and women eighteen dollars a week, . . . which was sufficient to support a family. However, I recall seeing tar paper shacks built in the desolate area of Islais Creek—shacks in which men found shelter against inclement weather.

Social and economic conditions in San Francisco's Skid Row (an area south of Market from Third to Sixth Streets) were especially desperate during the Great Depression. Quinn remembered seeing menus in the district offering three to four doughnuts and a coffee for as little as ten cents.

I was once accosted by an old gentleman down on his luck who asked me for five cents for a bowl of soup. Startled, I asked him if it was actually possible to get a bowl of soup for five cents. He assured me that it was. I gave him the nickel. On another occasion something similar happened when my personal fortune amounted to the fabulous sum of fifty cents. I was on my way to the Victoria Theater on 18th Street when a young man stopped me and asked me for a dime. For a moment I hesitated. After all, I had only fifty cents. But I broke down and gave him ten cents. Without a word of thanks, he took the dime and ran directly across 16th Street to a restaurant. There was no doubt about his hunger. My conscience overcame me. I followed him into the restaurant and gave him fifteen cents more. My personal fortune was reduced to twenty-five cents, and my conscience rested easily. Admission to the Victoria Theater was fifteen cents. A milk shake at Mooney's on the way home was ten cents. I was well off.

Quinn's family could be counted among the more fortunate. The lumber firm of Allen and Dettman, where his father worked, retained all their employees by working them every other week. Despite the decrease in pay, this scheme safeguarded an income for the Quinns. To offset their losses, however, the family's connections managed to take care of their own. Frank's cousin was manager of the Civic Auditorium. Through his efforts, Frank was able to secure temporary jobs at events such as the annual auto show and dog show. As he says, "I was employed as a janitor and glad to be employed. The pay was good. Five dollars a day."

In 1935, together with thousands of others, Frank Quinn took a civil service examination for the Post Office Department, which was held at Galileo High School. The list of eligible candidates took a long time to be posted, but when it did, Frank discovered that he had passed high enough on the list of names to get a permanent job as a letter carrier. In 1936, he went to work for the Post Office. Apart from a tour of duty in the Pacific (also in the mail sector) during World War II, Frank Quinn spent his entire working life after 1936 working for the city of San Francisco. Prior to his "official" retirement, he became Registrar of Voters for the city and county of San Francisco. For a young Irish kid who began his working life as a newspaper boy and butcher's assistant during the depression, Quinn's story, in its own model manner, is a testament to human endurance and self-belief.

While Quinn may have retired from official city work, his life well into his eighties was still full of challenges and opportunities. In his seventies, he regularly took the bus from his Sunset home to one of San Francisco's many archive libraries, and he taught a local history course at the University of San Francisco. His courses were filled to capacity at each offering, and his unique teaching style was greatly admired by his students and colleagues at USF. Quinn was a regular visitor to Ireland since his first trip in the mid-1950s when he was curious enough to cross the border to see for himself the consequences of partition. On returning to his father's village of Kiskeam in Cork, he even paid an uninvited visit to Longueville House to see what remained of "the gang my father's people had to tip their caps to before they came to the United States." Very much a rebel Corkman in his own right, Frank Quinn had a finger on the pulse of Irish-American life. In 1993, he and his wife Jessica hosted a crew from KQED

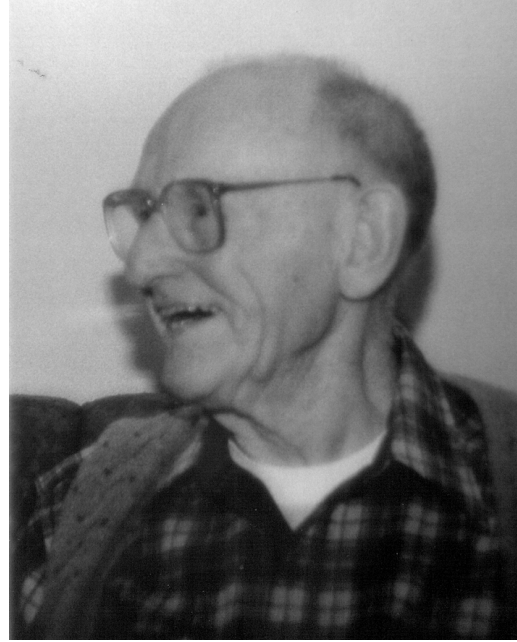


FIGURE 4-6 Frank Quinn reminiscing about the past. *Photo credit: Cecilia McDonnell.*

and gave them a walking tour through the Mission District of their youth. Their debonair television appearance for a series on San Francisco neighborhoods was a classic exposé of oral history in the making. Televised many times during the past ten years, Quinn's walk "down Mission Street" exemplified much that is essential in the tapestry of Irish-American life in old San Francisco.

Chapter excerpt from THE IRISH IN THE BAY AREA: Essays ON GOOD FORTUNE

Edited by Donald Jordan and Timothy J. O'Keefe (San Francisco: Irish Literary and Historical Society, 2005, 310 pp

NOTE: from a Project MUSE review by John W. Hink Jr.

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/228977>

"Two essays strengthen the book's central claim that the Irish experience in the area was distinctive. The San Francisco Irish were not only much nearer the top of the social pyramid than in other communities; they were also interacting with groups with which the Irish seldom came into contact in the East..."