

THE PHELAN FAMILY OF UPPER CHURCH, COUNTY TIPPERARY

The earliest direct ancestor positively identified with our family was Milesius, the King of Spain who arrived in Ireland in 1700 B.C. Through the line of his son Heremon, the great pagan kings of Ireland ruled from the majestic Hills of Tara. Ireland was represented as a sublime princess - "the mystical bride of the Kings of Tara". These great kings of Tara were the Kings of Ireland. They were the direct ancestors of the Phelans to come!

The founder of the family was Fiacha Suidhe, the brother of Conn of the Hundred Battles who was King of Ireland in 148 A.D. They were the sons of Felim Rachtmar (or Felim the Law-giver), who was the 108th Monarch of Ireland. Fiacha Suidhe acquired the Desi Temrach (also called the Deece) near Temhair or Tara in the ancient Province of Meath. The three sons of Fiacha settled it.

However, because of a conflict, the Desi were driven from their homes at Tara and were suddenly reduced to vagabondage. During this time Ireland seemed to have a surplus of men and energy to spread abroad. About the year 250 A.D., a military expedition was made by the Desi into Wales which was part of Roman Britain. For the next three hundred years, part of the Desi occupied the Dyfed (the most western peninsula of Wales) where St. Patrick was seized as a slave and sent to Ireland to shepherd sheep. As we know, this was to change all of history!

By the middle of the 3rd century, they had become so numerous that King Oilioll Olum gave them their own land in the Province of Munster. Retaining their original name from the Deece in Meath, the northern Desi (i.e. Desi Tucuskert) went to the ancestors of the Phelans who ruled as Chiefs and Princes of the Decies. In the middle of the 5th century, King Cormac of Munster gave the Decies even more land. It was the Decies Tucuskert which first established the Kingship of Cashel. Thus, the Rock of Cashel became their seat of power and influence; for hundreds of years it was the homeland of the Phelan ancestors.

Incidentally, one of the very first saints in Ireland during this time (just before the second arrival of St. Patrick who was now about to be a "Shepherd of Souls") was St. Declan. This holy man was not only the Bishop of Ardmore (which comprised the entire county of Waterford), he was also the Prince of the Decies! He was ordained by the Pope in Rome in the first half of the 5th century. Many, many miracles were attributed to this great saint. Late in life he visited St. David in Wales where David was the Bishop of Dyfed - i.e., the Desi colony of Wales.

For seven centuries the Phelan ancestors ruled as "PRINCES OF THE DECIES" (which by then included all the present County of Waterford, the eastern part of County Clare, and the southern part of County Tipperary to just north of the Rock of Cashel.

It is important to mention that the Desi Tucuskeret was also the "Clan Dalcais". The chief "Brehon" (law giver and interpreter of the law) had to be a member of the Decies from the Dal Cais tribe.

The Phelan name actually begins in the 11th century with a Dalcassian warrior named "Faolain/Faelan", son of Cormac mac Melaglin who was the Bishop of Lismore as well as the Prince of the Decies. When his father, the good King-Bishop, was martyred in 908, Faelan took control and became Lord of the Decies. At this time in history, Ireland became one of the first countries in the world to develop surnames. Faolain was a popular first name in Ireland from around the time of Christ. Now, in the eleventh century, it became a surname for the first time! Faolain's great great grandson, Donal, became Donal O'Faolain. In the Irish language, O'Faolain means "descendant of the wolf-like warrior". Please note that this name was chosen as a surname by only one family - the Prince of the Decies from the Dal Cais Clan. Every person today by the name of "Phelan" or "Whelan" has come from this one single family.

It was also during this time that one of the Princes of the Decies married a descendant of King Brian Boru - the Emperor of the Irish. In Dr. Keating's "History of Ireland". we learn that Molta, the Prince of the Decies, son of Domnall, son of Faelan was one of the "kin" of Brian Boru who was slain with Brian by the Vikings in the "Battle of Clontarf" (which put an end to Viking rule in Ireland once and for all) on Good Friday in the Year 1014. Although over twelve thousand men died in this battle, only a dozen men are given honorable mention in the Irish chronicles. Molta O'Faolain is listed as one of them. Oral and written tradition in the family claim the descent is through Brian's second son, Teige (who was murdered by his half brother Donough) . Thus all the Phelans/Whelans in this family history are direct descendants of the greatest King in all of Ireland!

The O'Faolain posterity continued to hold all the lands from the Rock of Cashel to the Waterford coast with a strong arm until the arrival of Strongbow and his Norman soldiers in Wales. When the invading Normans ruthlessly took control in the year 1170, Malachy O'Faolain was the last Prince to hold uncontested power in the Decies. However, through the appeal of Irish charm and persuasion (i.e., through intermarriage), the O'Faolains were to remain very prestigious for five hundred more years to come - until the arrival of the "Devil from England", Oliver Cromwell, in 1653.

Our family's branch of the O'Phelans remained in Waterford until the seventeenth century when, in 1653, Piers O'Felan left Waterford and came to Gleninsveneigh (near Shevery) in Upper Church, Co. Tipperary. This year is very significant in Irish history. It was the year that Oliver Cromwell passed a law banishing all the Irish Catholics (who lived east of the River Shannon) off their land and into the bogs of Connaught (the region west of the Shannon) - under the penalty of death! "To hell - or Connaught" was the saying. In their place, Cromwell gave all their cultivated farm lands to his fellow Puritans, soldiers, and benefactors who supported him in his ruthless revolution and corrupt rise to power in England. It was at this time that all the true Irish were forced to anglicize their surnames. Thus O'Faolain or O'Felan now became "Phelan".

Piers O'Felan in the Decies took advantage of this situation. He apparently was a tax collector who was appointed by Cromwell to levy taxes on all the hearths (fire places) in every cottage in Upper Church, Co. Tipperary which was now to be occupied by the English adventurers. After arriving in Gleninsveneigh, (once again under penalty of death) his name was changed from "Piers O'Felan" to "Pierce Phelan". However, Cromwell's master plan to transplant the English into Ireland and remove all vestiges of Catholic Celtic culture in Ireland failed. Despite the terrible evil and unmentionable suffering he inflicted upon the Irish, within a few short years practically all the Irish people who had been banished to the bogs were back in their cottages farming their own land. They were freed from the terrible religious puritanism of the evil Cromwell and could once again practice their Catholic faith a little more openly.

Meanwhile, Pierce Phelan had become well established in Upper Church. He was now collecting hearth taxes from his own race, the Irish, who now had the additional burden of buying back their old lands from their English landlords. No doubt, he had to be unpopular among his own fellow countrymen, at least for a while. However, in time, all this was seen as a necessary evil which was to keep peace with the Crown in England.

Like the name William, "Pierce" (Peter in English) is also a Celtic Norman name from northern France. It is quite certain that after the Norman invasion from Wales took place in Ireland, the Phelans of the Decies intermarried with their invaders and continued to attain a certain prestige. So it is not surprising that Pierce O'Phelan of 1653 was the man sent into Tipperary as the "hearth tax collector".

If you talk to Fr. O'Mara, the parish priest in Upper Church today, he will tell you that all the Phelans there claim to be descended from this Pierce! Even today, the name "Pierce" will usually appear somewhere in each branch of the family (usually as a middle name) as a proof that they are directly descended from this Pierce who came up from Waterford in 1653.

The father of all the Phelans in this family history is Pierce Phelan who was born several generations later around 1740. This genealogy deals specifically with four of his children: Patrick John - the father of the Florence, NY and the St. Thomas, Ontario Phelans; Thomas - the father of the St.Catharines, Ontario Phelans; Mary - (who married James Phelan) the mother of the Puslinch Phelans in Co. Wellington, Ontario; and William Francis Phelan.

This last son, Wm. Francis, was a very prominent man, an Esquire. He was also a man of great wealth and the father of sixteen children! Sometimes his name appears in the land deeds as William Phelan, Esq.; other times it appears as Francis Phelan, Esq.; and sometimes it appears as W. Frac. Phelan, Esq. They are all one in the same person from Shanballyduff (Shevry) in Upper Church, Co. Tipperary. It wasn't until after the great famine of 1848 that many of his children and grandchildren emigrated from Gaelic speaking Upper Church to the new world. Some settled in St.Catharines's and in Proton Ontario, Canada to work on the Welland Canal and clear the wilderness. (Some of their descendants later moved to the western states and provinces.) Others settled in

Syracuse, NY to work in the salt yards, or south-of the city in Pompey NY to farm the beautiful terrain which so strongly resembles that of their native Shevry in Ireland.

Their life was extremely difficult. But they persevered in their pilgrimage for love of God and love of family. With their blood still fresh in our veins, we have inherited their strong Christian faith - as well as their strong ties to Ireland, ancient Eire. Regardless of where the adventurous Phelan spirit has taken us, we are all linked to the land of our ancestors by a hereditary bond that reminds us that we are a unique people. We come from a hardy Irish stock of Chieftains and Rulers who held a high degree of influence in southern Ireland for over a thousand years! If you are one of the 2400 Phelans described in this Family History, you can hold your head high. You come from an illustrious (and prolific) lineage that traces its descent all the way from the pagan Kings of Tara to the great Catholic Princes of the Decies, and from there to the second son of "Brian Borull - Emperor of the Irish"

Fr. John E. Phelan
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