

## **KEARNEY Christopher James and MURTHA Adeline Regina**

### THE COURTSHIP OF CHRISTOPHER AND ADELINE

By 1927, Christopher James Kearney was working at the Frick coal works at Calumet, working on the hoist engines for the mine elevators and repairing pumps. At 34, he was still living at his parents' house in Calumet. Known for his thriftiness, Chris had managed to accumulate savings and investments of some \$10,000; he received stock in U.S. Steel through his job, and also bought some stock in General Motors.

Chris' courtship of Adeline began when he picked her up one day as she was walking home from teaching school and gave her a ride home. They soon began dating--going to movies, band concerts, and to visit friends. Often their dates simply consisted of a Sunday afternoon drive and a supper of barbecue sandwiches and orange soda. Adeline didn't seem to mind.

"He was kind and thoughtful," recalled Adeline, "which I needed so badly--it was shortly after my mother's death." Adeline said she had been told by Christopher that "I was what he had been hoping for. He was looking for a good person to be the mother of his children. I hope I didn't disappoint him or all of you."

That summer, Adeline went to Canada to vacation with her friend Mary Queer at a resort called Sparrow Lake. A musician in the band at the resort fell in love with her. When they danced, he sang "The One I Love Belongs to Somebody Else" to her.

Chris proposed to Adeline in the front living room of the house on Main Street. "I love you so much--I'd like to marry you," he told her. "Would you like to be the mother of my children?"

"I said yes at once," Adeline recalled, "before he had a chance to change his mind!"

Adeline broke the news to her family. "My father was pleased," she said. "He liked Grandpap--very much." She later said that her father and husband-to-be had much in common: Both were "easy-going, never complaining about work," and both "got along with everyone."

Chris' mother was not so happy about the match. She didn't want her son to get married; she had had a stroke and wanted Chris to stay home and take care of her. She ended up not attending the wedding, and never visited the couple at their home.

Christopher and Adeline were married on Wednesday, September 7, 1927, at a 7:30 A.M. mass at St. Joseph's Church in Mount Pleasant. Christopher wasn't on time to pick her up at her house, because the man who was driving him was late. While Adeline sang "This Is My Lucky Day," her sister-in-law Maude fretted that Christopher was going to stand her up.

Adeline wore a garnet panne velvet dress, "in keeping with the style of that time"--meaning just below the knee and with a cloche hat. Her hair at the time was fashionably bobbed. Kathryn Donnely was Adeline's bridesmaid, while Thomas Logan served as Chris' best man. Rev. Philip Moore, St. Joseph's pastor, officiated.

The couple celebrated the wedding with a breakfast at the Harbaugh Farm, near Pennsville, "for family and a few close friends." Her most vivid memory of that day was "looking at Dad (Grandpap) and thinking how much I loved him."

### EUROPEAN HONEYMOON

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After the wedding, Chris and Adeline sailed on the Antonia for six weeks in Europe--"a perfect honeymoon!" Adeline wrote. They had been given some money by her father, in addition to Chris' savings--he was carrying \$1,000 in a money belt. "Grandpap had some money," Adeline recalled, "but I was close to broke and didn't like to admit it." (In fact, her bank account was overdrawn when she got back from the honeymoon.)

Their son Patrick tells a story about the trip over: "As soon as their ship passed beyond the three-mile limit, Chris excused himself. Prohibition was still the law of the land in 1927, of course; but Chris liked an occasional drink, and wanted to avail himself of the opportunity as soon as the ship was in international waters. Mother was greatly shocked--she did not realize that Chris drank at all. Offered a drink of peach brandy by a steward on the ship, Mother at first balked. 'Go ahead, drink it down. It'll be good for you,' he said. She did. It was."

Adeline and Chris spent a week in Paris, where they attended an American Legion convention celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Allied Expeditionary Force. In a parade in Paris, they saw Gen. "Black Jack" Pershing, the commander of U.S. forces during the war.

The couple traveled to London for a few days, then took two weeks in Ireland, visiting the remaining Kearneys and Murtaghs in Shercock. In 1927, Ireland had been independent for only a few years, and Shercock was not far from the new frontier. Dolly Kearney, Chris' cousin who went around in "mannish" clothing, reportedly had worked with the IRA during the Irish Civil War, perhaps as a bicycle courier.

Chris was more sentimental about Ireland than Adeline was. "She was struck and maybe a little embarrassed by the poverty of Ireland," Kathleen Naureckas says. Before the trip, Thomas Kearney had advised his son to stay at the Kearney house while in Cavan, because it had a slate roof, whereas the Murtha home place still had a thatched roof.

It was the last time that any of the American Kearneys visited Ireland for nearly half of century. The next one to make the trip was Chris and Adeline's son Tom, who took a trip there in 1968. Without being introduced, Dolly recognized him on sight as the son of her cousin whom she hadn't seen for 50 years.

### **THE KEARNEYS OF MAIN STREET**

Chris had arranged to rent a house in Trauger, near Calumet where his parents lived, on their return from Europe. But fate--and Adeline's brother Jim--had other plans.

At the time, John Murtha was living in half of the house on Mount Pleasant's Main Street with his youngest son Joe, and Joe's young wife Dorothy. (John Murtha Jr. and his wife Maude lived in the other half.) When Adeline and Chris returned from their honeymoon, Jim Murtha invited them to breakfast at his home in Carpertown where he said to them, "You see how our father looks." John Murtha, his son felt, needed more care than his daughter-in-law could give him. He wanted Joe and Maude to move out and Adeline and Chris to move in. They did, and Chris lived in that house with Adeline for the rest of his life.

Adeline had fond memories of married life. "I enjoyed being a wife, housewife and then a mother," she wrote. "I grew up in a happy, pleasant, loving home and was lucky enough to have the same happiness as a wife and mother. Sure we worked hard, sure we got cranky sometimes; but the happiness and love far outweighed any misery." Her marriage seems to have been a passionate one--when Chris held her, she said, she didn't want him to let her go.

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Chris and Adeline started their family quickly. Their first child, Marie, was born almost exactly nine months after their wedding, on June 29, 1928. (The family suspects that she was conceived in Paris.) She was named for her maternal grandmother, Mary Ann Murtha.

Marie was followed, on July 13, 1929, by Christopher James Jr., who was known as Jim (apparently to Chris' disappointment). Margaret Adele, always known as Adele, was born on April 7, 1931. In theory, the first three kids had been named for Adeline's mother, for Christopher and for Christopher's mother; in practice, they were called for Adeline's mother, eldest brother and self.

At this time, there was plenty of family around to keep the Kearney kids company: Uncle John and Aunt Maude lived on the other side of the house, Uncle Felix and Uncle Harry lived across the street, Uncle Frank lived around the corner on Washington Street, and Uncle Jim lived one mile out of town in Carpentertown. All these relatives were constantly visiting John Murtha, Sr., who lived with the Kearneys on Main Street until his death.

"I didn't know there were other people in the world until I was 10 years old," Marie Kearney Zelenka says. She attended a Catholic grade school, and she remembers that once a visiting priest--Father O'Conner, himself a distant cousin, perhaps a nephew of Marie's great-grandfather James Murtha--asked her classroom (which included two grades) which students were related to Sister Theodosia. Some six students stood up.

Christopher Kearney continued to work for the Frick company after his marriage. "Daddy broke his leg while he was working in a mine near Uniontown, the one where he had to walk a mile underground to get to the coal face," Kathleen Naureckas recalls. "Mother would ride the streetcar to Uniontown to visit him. Ever the romantic, she carried notes from a man who lived in Mt. Pleasant to his fiancée who was a nurse at the hospital in Uniontown."

### **KEARNEY DISTRIBUTING**

In 1934, a year after Prohibition ended, Father Gilbert Straub's family had a brewery in St. Mary's that made St. Mary's beer. Father Straub was looking for a distributor in Mount Pleasant, and asked Harry Murtha, Adeline's brother, if he was interested. Harry, who was known to be quite a talker, convinced Christopher to go into the beer business with him. Chris brought some money into the project, and also a knack for calculation: "He could add up the price of a load of beer while another man was looking for a pencil and a piece of paper," Adeline recalled.

Still, Christopher at first kept his job at the mines--at this point, Calumet had closed, and he now worked at Footdale, above Uniontown, doing timbering. He drove five or six men to work with him every day.

Meanwhile, the Kearney family kept growing. Thomas James Kearney, named for his paternal grandfather, was born on February 15, 1934. And when Harry Murtha's wife Phyllis died, the Kearneys took in both him and his son Jack. (Harry's two daughters went to live with another aunt in Pittsburgh.)

As the local mines closed, from the Great Depression, competition from works with cheaper costs, or simply from exhaustion of the deposits, much of Mount Pleasant's Irish community--including some of the Murthas--moved away to where mines were still operating, largely toward Uniontown in Fayette County.

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Marie says that growing up she thought of herself more as a Murtha than as a Kearney, but that gradually the Kearneys became as well-known in Mt. Pleasant as the Murthas had been. Instead of saying to her, "Aren't you a Murtha?" as the storekeepers had before, they would say, "Aren't you a Kearney?" "The Kearney name--and face--was always good for credit if you ran short of money in Mt. Pleasant," Marie reports.

Chris' sister, Sister Agnes Catherine, would traditionally come to visit the Kearney family on New Year's Day, when everyone was preoccupied with football bowl games. (Notre Dame was the team Chris rooted for.) Agnes Catherine, who was mystified by football, once asked: "Which team do the men in the striped shirts play for?"

On October 12, 1936, the new baby was born. Adeline wanted to name her Christine after her father (and because she was born on Columbus Day). Chris grumbled, "You wouldn't call a son after me, why would you want to name a daughter after me?" So the baby was christened Kathleen, after Chris' sister Catherine, a name he had unsuccessfully suggested for both Marie and Adele. He used to sing "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen" to her.

With Kathleen's arrival it was recognized that the Kearney family was too big for half a house. Uncle John and Aunt Maude moved out, and the two halves of the house were joined together.

Harry Murtha, Christopher's business partner, died on New Year's Day, 1937, of a bleeding ulcer. After five years, the beer distributorship that he had launched with Chris Kearney was not going well at all. There was a lot of thought that it was time to give up. Chris considered it, and then said, "I think I'll just give it one more year and see how it goes." Almost immediately, business improved, and soon became a thriving operation that continued for decades. In 1938, he quit his job with the coal mines that he had held for 29 years, to devote himself full time to the beer business. He used to drive around to the local taverns every Tuesday, taking weekly orders; many of the bars were "on the ridge" above Mount Pleasant.

Chris had a personal connection to a brewer that may have helped him get some business. He apparently knew "Stoney" Jones, owner of Jones Brewery and maker of Stoney's beer, from their mutual service in World War I. Stoney's was one of the more popular drinks in the Mount Pleasant area, and when there was beer in the Kearneys' own refrigerator, that was usually the brand. (Stoney Jones may be more noteworthy, however, as the father of Shirley Jones, star of Oklahoma, Carousel and The Partridge Family.)

Local beers seem to have been the main stock at Kearney Distributing, with such appropriately named brands as Iron City, Fort Pitt and Duquesne. Rolling Rock, which is now probably the most famous Pennsylvania beer, was a relatively small part of the shop's trade, at least in the early days; it apparently had a slightly snooty reputation among residents of Mount Pleasant.

In part for business reasons, Chris became quite a joiner. He belonged to the American Legion (the James E. Zundell Post, named for his World War I captain), the VFW, the Elks, the Moose, the Eagles, the Polish Falcons and the Kosciusko Club. He may have been a member of the Sons of Italy and the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

Chris wore a tailor-made three-piece suit to work--except in the summer, when he wore suit pants and a white shirt with no tie--and he shined his shoes every day. He took pleasure in his appearance, in his Marsh Wheeling cigars and in his meals: "Daddy loved to eat, and he had catholic tastes in food," Kathleen recalls. "He liked pickled pigs feet and sardines, Chinese food

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and Italian food, and the Pennsylvania Dutch dish scrapple." He liked to say "What's the damage?" when he asked for a bill.

After Harry's death, the Kearney family took on two new wards: Robert (known as Bud) and Ed Kearney, Chris's nephews. (The boys also lived periodically with their Uncle Tom and Aunt Catherine Kearney.) Bud, who later became a doctor, credited Adeline with giving him the encouragement he needed to be a success in his studies.

John Murtha Kearney, Chris and Adeline's sixth child, was born July 9, 1941--not long before the outbreak of World War II. None of Chris and Adeline's sons were old enough to fight in the war, though Marie remembers singing anti-Japanese songs like "You're a Sap, Mr. Jap."

Many in the Murtha and Kearney families took a more active part in the war, however. Five of the Cronin boys were in the military during World War II, and Helen Cronin was an Army nurse stationed in New Guinea. Bud Kearney was in the Army, and Edward Kearney was in the Navy. Two Jack Murthas--Jim's Jack and Harry's Jack--served in the Air Corps, both were shot down and both spent time in German POW camps. Of all the Murthas and Kearneys that were in the war, however, none were killed, and only one--George Cronin--was wounded.

The '40s were successful years for Kearney Distributing, with beer consumption up during the war. Later, beer was bought for big parties to welcome soldiers back from overseas. The profits were enough to finance the construction of a sizable office and warehouse behind the Kearney house in 1947, allowing the business to be moved out of the back wing of the residence. (The part of the house used for the business was torn down, expanding the back yard.) At its peak, the business had three employees, Mike Zoracki, John Treber and Johnny Crapcinski (known as "the drivers")--in addition to the Kearney boys, naturally. ("I'll send the boy" was Christopher's frequent promise.)

He was a generous employer, according to his son John; he recalls that one of the drivers called in sick on the Pittsburgh Pirates' opening day every year for 25 years. Chris never said a word.

He did save quite a bit of money, investing it wisely in AT&T stock. (He also had U.S. Steel stock that he bought while working for Frick.) The shop's prosperity also allowed Chris to buy his pride and joy: a 1950 Buick Roadmaster, a very long black car with a straight eight engine and Dynaflo transmission. He liked to quote the advertising slogan: "When better cars are built, Buick will build them."

Chris and Adeline's last child, Patrick Joseph Kearney, arrived January 27, 1946. "Every big family has one straggler, but we were really surprised when Pat came along," Adeline said. She recalled hearing her husband's voice in the hallway of the hospital, exclaiming to a nurse who happened to be passing by: "Adeline says that the last baby is just as nice as the first one was!"

Patrick recalls his father as "a man with a strong, biological love for his children," who formed the "Palsey-Walsey Club" with his youngest son and suggested that the two of them should run away and join the circus. Kathleen, too, strongly remembers her father's love: "Daddy never tried to conceal his pride in our accomplishments, whatever they were," she says.

## **THE LAST YEARS**

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Christopher suffered a series of strokes in his later years, so that he needed a walker to get around and talked only with difficulty. Adeline cared for him lovingly until the end. His bed was moved downstairs after one of his strokes, to spare him from walking up and down the long Kearney staircase; at that point, Adeline asked him if he would rather she slept upstairs to avoid troubling him. His response: "Get in here where you belong, woman!"

Adeline and Christopher celebrated 50 years of marriage in 1977, with a celebration attended by their children and most of their grandchildren. Two years later, on April 12, 1979, Christopher died in Mount Pleasant's hospital, aged 86.

After Chris' death, Adeline continued to live in the Main Street house for a time, but eventually, needing more care for herself, she lived successively in the homes of her children. Most of her time she spent in Henderson, Nevada, with her eldest daughter Marie and her husband Bill. There Adeline developed a taste for playing nickel slots after church on Sundays.

Adeline died on August 18, 1995, at the age of 94. (In her latter days, she was noted for responding, when anyone's age was mentioned--no matter how old--"That's young!") No doubt she would have said that her proudest accomplishment was a family that included seven children, 23 grandchildren and at that point 25 great-grandchildren; subsequently the number has grown to 31. In a sense she was the matriarch of a much larger clan; she was the last surviving child of John and Mary Ann Murtha and so could be said to preside over their ever-expanding progeny.

It was at Adeline's funeral that I realized that she had been a living bond that held so many people together, and that without her presence the extended family risked drifting apart into its constituent nuclear fragments. The idea of this family history was conceived then as a hopeful attempt to keep us as one family by reminding us of where we came from and thus who we are.