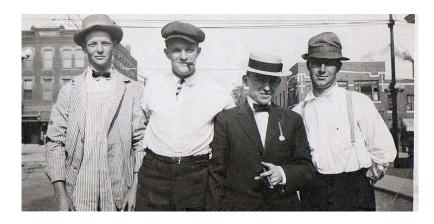# Irish Immigrants
By Michael Stahl

Two very famous American comedians have something very interesting in common with two American presidents. Stephen Colbert and Conan O'Brien, who, as of 2013, are considered two of the funniest Americans, host their own late night talk shows and are among the funniest men in the country. They each also have ancestors who were Irish and both have publicly commented on their Irish pride. President John F. Kennedy was often recognized as the first Irish-Catholic man to be the president, and he remains the lone Catholic president in American history. President Barack Obama also has a family tree whose branches stretch to Ireland, which came as a surprise to many, even to President Obama. However, not only do all four men have Irish roots, but each of their respective families also left their homeland for America during one of the most devastating eras in the history of the small island country of Ireland: The Great Famine.

In the year 1845, the diets of one-third of the people of Ireland were entirely made up of potatoes. This illustrates the fact that Ireland was already a country that had greater than its fair share of poverty even before The Great Famine, which is often referred to as The Irish Potato Famine in countries outside of Ireland. When a disease often referred to as "potato blight" started to destroy potato crops, not only in Ireland, but also throughout Europe, the weight of worry quickly altered the Irish people's outlook. In 1845, roughly one-third of the potatoes grown in Ireland were lost and that was just the start. The next year, three-quarters of the crops were wiped out by the blight. The farming was so poor that year that in 1847 many pessimistic potato farmers did not even attempt to grow crops. 1848 saw one-third of the pre-famine average crop haul. And on-and-on it went.

The Great Famine lasted until 1853. Though the crops began to thrive in the countryside once again that year, the damage had been done. At the start of the famine, Ireland had a population of around 9 million people, but by its end, nearly twenty-five percent of the people were gone. It has been estimated that one million people or more died from starvation and diseases, while another million or so fled the country in that eight-year period. Half of the immigrant population that made its way into the borders of the United States was from Ireland in the 1840s.

One thing Ireland is known for is its bright green, hilly landscape. When the Irish left their homeland for what they thought would be greener pastures in America, they did so by boat. Conditions were so poor on those vessels and the travel time was so long that the term "coffin ship" was coined because a great number of Irish people died on the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Those that survived were so poor that they had little choice but to stay in whatever city the boat they traveled on docked at. The urban areas where they ended up settling were very different from Ireland, for reasons beyond the geography and color of the landscape.

Though the Irish would quickly make up large portions of the populations of major American cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston, where almost half the people were new Irish immigrants, the locals treated them with much hostility. Citizens of these areas felt a sense of entitlement to resources because they had been there longer and were more "American" than the Irish. The Irish were easy to pick out of a crowd, too. They spoke with heavy accents and brought over a very different style of clothing than what most Americans wore in those days. These characteristics, and the fact that many of them were uneducated and untrained in any trade or business, made their new neighbors and countrymen scorn them.

Noticing the influx of people entering the cities, building owners reconfigured their spaces, making smaller apartments out of bigger ones so as to accommodate more tenants. The Irish had to pay for their housing out of wages from low-paying jobs that required back-breaking work. Most of the Irish men, if they were able to get work at all, performed physical labor. America was expanding and needed new roadways, railways, bridges, tunnels, and canals. Many of the Irish immigrants took jobs in those industries as well as in mining. Still, landlords overcharged Irish tenants for small living spaces that often lacked ventilation and plumbing. Because money and food were so scarce, while housing was so expensive, women also had to join in as a tremendous part of the Irish workforce, taking servants' jobs as housekeepers, nannies, and maids.

To make matters worse, when hard economic times hit portions of the country, the Irish were the last to be employed. Many businesses that did need workers posted signs that said they were hiring, but added "Irish need not apply" if they did not feel too desperate for laborers. The sign became so widespread throughout the country that even when it was shortened to just "INNA," readers understood exactly what it meant. Examples like these of pure hatred towards Irish immigrants have drawn comparisons to the American treatment of blacks at that time, which was still before the Civil War had been fought and the Emancipation Proclamation written. Though arguments about the origin of the term "Black Irish" vary, some historians believe it was used to describe a kind of pecking order within the Irish community. The Irish had been migrating to America before the Great Famine and those who had been in the U.S. longer had more ample opportunity to gain financial security. Those who fled Ireland and starvation due to the potato blight, on the other hand, were viewed as members of the lowest class of people. Thus, when someone was labeled Black Irish, it was a hint at a class association with African Americans and not an observation of a poor Irishman's physical characteristics; regardless of wealth, the majority of Irish immigrants had light hair, eyes, and skin.

Many politicians sought to gain votes off of the newfound hatred of the Irish-Catholic immigrants. "Nativists" had campaigned decades prior, though mostly on anti-Native American platforms. When the Irish came and the subsequent prejudice against them became commonplace, Nativists were reenergized. After creating the "American Party," they actually gave speeches promising that if they were elected into various offices, they would find a way to close up American borders to keep the Irish from entering. The incredible irony about Nativists is that none of them were really native at all; they had simply been in the U.S. a couple of generations longer than the Irish, and some even less than that. Nevertheless, they were so volatile that they held violent demonstrations from time to time and lead attacks on Catholic churches. Some Irish immigrant deaths have been attributed to such outbursts of violence against them.

For the Irish to gain favor in America, it would take violence—both sanctioned by the government, and not. The Civil War created a ripe opportunity for these political conflicts to come to a head. During the war, there were drafts that required men to fight. Draft riots erupted in New York City because Irish immigrants insisted that the rules of the draft would draw an unfair number of Irish into service. Still, incredibly, about 140,000 Irishmen enlisted in the Union Army. After the Union victory, some formerly prejudiced Americans began to view the Irish as assets to the country, for they had proven their loyalty on the battlefields.

Slowly, but surely, the Irish began to fit into America a little more comfortably. They began many of the early trade unions, founded police departments, and fire departments, too.

By the twentieth century, Irish Catholics became a force to be reckoned with in politics. Boston elected an Irish mayor, James Michael Curley. In the 1920s, one of New York State's governors, Al Smith, was Irish. Both he and Mr. Curley set the stage for the rise of John F. Kennedy to the White House.

History shows that, from the Great Famine to the coffin ships, from the prejudice to the Civil War draft, Irish-Americans have been a resilient bunch. It's no wonder that the Notre Dame mascot is called The Fighting Irish.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Which event made one million Irish people leave Ireland in the mid-1800s?

    A the Black Death
    B World War I
    C the American Civil War
    D the Great Famine

2. Some Americans began to view the Irish as assets to the country. Which of the following cause created this effect?

    A 140,000 Irishmen enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War and proved their loyalty on the battlefields.
    B The Irish were overcharged for smaller apartments when they moved to American cities.
    C The Irish traveled to America in "coffin ships" and many died on the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.
    D By the twentieth century, Irish Catholics became a force to be reckoned with in American politics.

3. Read the sentences: "Many businesses that did need workers posted signs that said they were hiring, but added 'Irish need not apply' if they did not feel as though they were too desperate for laborers…. Examples like these of pure hatred towards Irish immigrants have drawn comparisons to the American treatment of blacks at the time, which was still before The Civil War had been fought and the Emancipation Proclamation written."

This evidence supports which of the following conclusions about how the Irish were viewed in America at this time?

    A The Irish were well-respected members of society.
    B The Irish were considered to be the part of the lower classes of society.
    C The Irish were hated more than the blacks in society.
    D The Irish were considered slaves.

4. What can be concluded about the effect of the Irish on American history?

    A The Irish had a very minimal effect on American history.
    B The Irish had a major effect on American history, from the Civil War to current politics.
    C The Irish had an effect only in American cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.
    D The Irish only had negative effects on American history.

5. What is the main idea of this passage?

   A While Irish immigrants have faced many challenges in America, they have overcome these challenges and contributed much to American society.
   B The Great Famine is a warning that crop yields can determine your future.
   C Racism in the 1800s and 1900s was not limited to those that were identified as black or African-American.
   D The best politicians and comedians of American history have been Irish, despite unique difficulties in their lives.

6. Read the sentences: "By the twentieth century, Irish Catholics became **a force to be reckoned with** in politics. Boston elected an Irish mayor, James Michael Curley. In the 1920s, one of New York State's governors, Al Smith, was Irish. Both he and Mr. Curley set the stage for the rise of John F. Kennedy to the White House."

What does the author mean by the term "**a force to be reckoned with**"?

   A a negative force
   B a debate team
   C a powerful or influential force
   D a judgmental group

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

The term "Irish need not apply" became very popular on store signs; _____, store owners shortened the term to "INNA" and readers still understood its meaning.

   A as a result
   B before
   C however
   D because

8. Describe at least two challenges the Irish faced when they moved to American cities. Use information from the passage to support your answer.

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_____

9. What benefits did the Irish enjoy when they began to fit into America a little more comfortably after the American Civil War?

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10. The author notes that "Irish-Americans have been a resilient bunch." A person who is resilient is strong and able to recover from unpleasant or damaging events.

Using information from the passage, explain why Irish-Americans can be considered a "resilient bunch."

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