



MICHAEL Boyle senior and Margaret Boyle, nee Martin, in 1952, 40 years after the Titanic went down.

prosperous and politically-active Hooker family.

It was while in America she posed for a handsome black and white photo with her three brothers - Owen, Jim and Pat and the latter's wife Delia, and her sister Celia Martin, all living in the Hartford area. Margaret wears a lovely white blouse, her lustrous hair piled high and her high cheekbones defining her face.

Shades of her strong character emerged, as it became known that she had become close to a man who, shockingly for then, rumour had it was a non-Catholic and - probably as bad - said to have German origins. My Aunt Margaret Cleary - my father's sister who lives in Manchester, Conn - believes his first name was possibly Michael and surname Blackburn.

I employed a genealogist to help me overcome hurdles I faced. Michael Rochford (www.heir-line.co.uk) found a copy of the Titanic ticket and then, amazingly, helped track down a Blackburn family in Connecticut.

He discovered the Blackburns left Dewsbury - a mill town only six miles from my home today - where the father was a foreman and moved to Sagan in Germany for him to work in a mill there.

A widower, he met and married a German woman and en masse they emigrated to Windsor Locks, Connecticut, which had a developing mill industry. Michael Blackburn was a product of his father's first marriage, but had a German step-mother - hence the link.

The family story passed

down is that at some point my grandmother won a raffle and the unusual prize was a paid trip back to Ireland - so she went home - as yet I cannot find when.

I personally doubt there was ever a raffle and wonder it was a story put out by her family? Did her spinster aunt, then in her 50s, disapprove of the relationship? Did she write to her brother and wife telling them what their beloved daughter was doing who then ordered their young daughter home?

With the religious and cultural differences, Margaret and Michael were never going to be, though as she left America for good, he gave her a gold ring with the letter M engraved inside it. In the romantic sense, they were ships that pass in the night. She later told a neighbour it was an engagement ring.

Margaret's effort to carve out a new life in the bright New World ended not as maybe she hoped. And so in 1923, at the relatively late age of 32, Margaret wed my grandfather Michael Boyle, a man older than herself. It was thought to be a semi-arranged match.

They settled at his family homestead in Emracly outside Milltown. After fathering seven children, including a set of twins, Michael succumbed to arthritis - so severe that my own father Michael could never recall seeing him walk.

But the redoubtable Margaret coped with her lot, running the small farm, raising her brood and overseeing the seven neighbouring orphaned Donnelly children. When



THE Boyle cottage at Emracly.

social workers came to take them to a children's homes, she put her cattle on their land and simply refused to allow them to be split up. To this day, the Donnellys - many now in Philadelphia - credit her with keeping them together.

The circle of life continued and, as countless other families had to, she waved off one son, Pat, and three daughters, Mary, Margaret and Philomena to the US, and my dad and his brother Jimmy for the UK, while the youngest Sean stayed behind to run the family farm.

Dad eventually settled in Wakefield and worked for decades as a miner and a labourer. His siblings settled to varying degrees in the US. Margaret was just 16 when in 1948 she left their thatched cottage home - with no electricity or indoor toilet - and flew into New York for a new life.

My generations of the family undoubtedly benefited from their hard work - we were the first to go to university, travel the world for pleasure, not necessity, and have genuinely comfortable lives.

After my gran's death at the great age of 92 in 1982, her wedding ring and her lost love's ring - which she had kept all her life - were passed to her daughter Mary in Philadelphia.

As for her lost love, my aunt Margaret Cleary was introduced to Mr Blackburn at a social event in Hartford in the 1950s, where she had settled.

Mother-of-five Margaret, now 85 and living in Manchester, Conn, recalls the meeting: "It was at a picnic and my Uncle

Pat Martin, a bus driver, introduced us. Mr Blackburn was told I was Margaret's daughter but he said he knew straight away who I was as I looked like my mother.

"I think he was called Michael but I am unsure. My mother did tell me about him when I was young. I wish now I had asked her more but you don't think about it at the time."

Mr Blackburn told my aunt that he had never married but was very pleased to meet her. Did he always hold a candle for my grandmother?

My grandmother told a friend she regretted leaving America. I took my children to see the house where she worked as a maid and thought why wouldn't she feel sad - leaving her first love and the home comforts and hopes of a modern US to return to the hard life of rural Ireland.

Today, Sean's son Michael tends to the farm at Emracly. One day, I hope to tell Margaret's story in a book. Meanwhile, it is left to us, the ancestors she left behind, to ponder how different life would have been if Margaret Martin had boarded the Titanic - if she had not missed the boat in many senses of her life - but such was the journey she took that brought me to be born and raised in Yorkshire and my other family to America.



MICHAEL Boyle, the author's father, at home in Emracly.



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