

## DISINHERITANCE IN AN IRISH-AMERICAN FAMILY

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The focus of this paper will be the conflict between a mother and her in-marrying daughters-in-law. This conflict remained unresolved throughout Grandmother's lifetime, ending with the disinheritance of her two sons at her death.

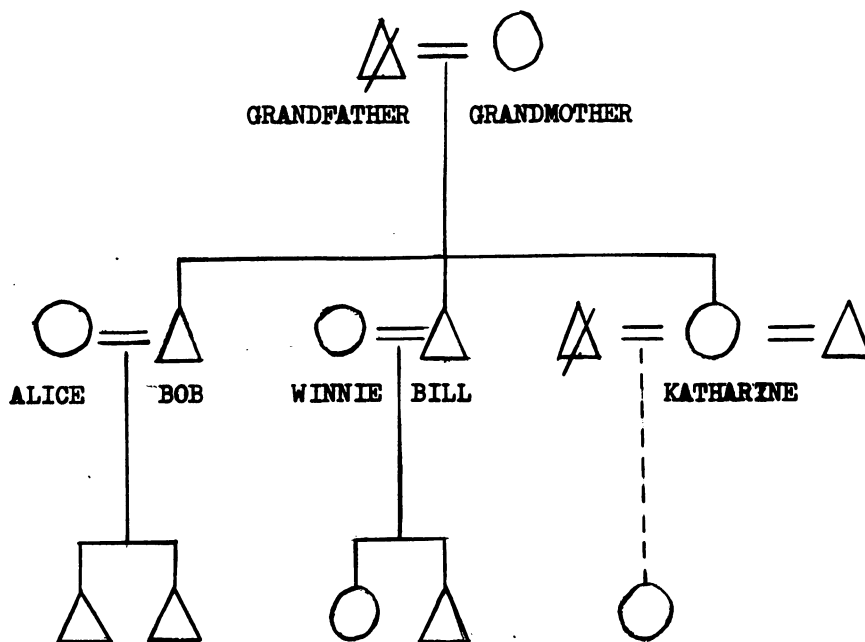
Grandmother was widowed when her children were in their early twenties. Although she was financially secure, her sons continued living with her until their stronger marriage ties forced them to separate. Both sons married at a late age -- Bob at 32 and Bill at 38. Bob, being the older and first to marry, brought his wife, Alice, home to live with Grandmother and Bill. Grandmother and Alice could not get along and finally Bob and Alice left San Francisco and moved to Santa Barbara.

During the war Bill, the only child still living at home, was transferred to Canada. There, he married a Canadian woman. When the war ended, they returned to San Francisco to live with Grandmother, who was then living by herself. After almost a year of constant disagreements, Winnie and Bill had to leave Grandmother's as life had become unbearable for Winnie. They moved to Oakland.

Grandmother then moved to Santa Barbara. Her daughter's first husband had died, and Katharine had remarried. This second marriage met with Grandmother's approval (the first had not). Katharine and her family were now living in southern California. Grandmother was

living closer to the children with whom she got along best -- her daughter and her favorite son. Alice's feelings were disregarded. Several years after moving to Santa Barbara Grandmother died. She bestowed all her worldly belongings upon Katharine.

The structural relationships in this particular situation did not help to relieve a poor situation. Both sons had brought their wives home to live. Though the situation seemed unbearable, it might have been softened if Alice or Winnie could have turned to their own families for support. Geographical limitations made this impossible. Winnie's family was in Canada and Alice's was in Florida. They had both been stranded in an unfamiliar locale in the household of a woman with whom they did not get along. If they had had each



other for support, it might have been easier. But by the time Winnie had come to live with Grandmother, Alice had already left the area.

If the possibility had existed for Grandmother to live with Katharine, a more agreeable situation might have occurred. But Katharine moved quite frequently, and remarried shortly after the death of her first husband. Grandmother did not wish to become a burden in her life.

Another factor contributing to the tension was the fact that Alice and Winnie were not Catholic. Grandmother was a very devout Irish Catholic and had brought up her children accordingly, but both her sons had married outside the Church. To further emphasize the importance of being Catholic, Grandmother had insisted on the baptism of all her grandchildren.

When Grandfather died, Grandmother took over the position of authority in her sons' lives. Thus their relationship with her became very intense for a prolonged period of time. After marrying, they tried to remain neutral in all bickering, hoping the women would work things out for themselves. Even after they moved out of her household, they never criticized her for the rejection of their wives. Up until her death, they supported her financially even though she had money of her own.

There was no one to act as a buffer between Grandmother and her daughters-in-law, as grandfathers commonly do. Her sons preferred to play submissive roles.

Grandmother's cultural background also played an important part in her inability to accept her daughters-in-law. She was the child of Irish immigrant parents and married a man of the same background. The family structure in which she tried to function was the patrilocal household typical of rural Ireland.

In such a system, newly married couples came to live with the husband's family on their farm. The old people remained in control. The new daughter-in-law was a stranger and outsider and was treated like one. She was in an apprentice position to her mother-in-law in her daily activity of domestic chores. She could return home quite frequently, but usually settled down to the routine. The sons married at quite a late age and maintained a strong emotion-laden relationship with their mother. This intensified the tension in the relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. This stressful relationship was quite common. Sons may even have had to leave the farm if the situation became unbearable and were considered right in doing so. Friends, relatives, and the local priest might have tried to smooth things over before it reached the final stage.

Although this family was not in rural Ireland, the similarities are so strong that a comparison cannot be avoided. In this particular situation, many of the tension-reducing mechanisms found in Ireland were lacking. The wives were more than just strangers from another farm. They were from different cultural and religious backgrounds. They were not brought up in the society, and were completely unprepared

for what was in store for them. There was neither a local priest nor relatives and friends to counsel them during the initial period of adjustment. Although the sons may be considered right in having left their mother's household, they had to be ready to accept the consequences. They had left, so to speak, the family fortune behind.

In analyzing these relationships, the importance of individual personalities cannot be overlooked. Grandmother appears to have been a dominant figure. Although she was old, she did not want to let go of her authority in the lives of her sons. Using her money to gain control, Grandmother thought that by telling Winnie and Alice that they were not going to inherit her money she could continue to have power in her sons' lives. She had not counted on the strong relationship her children had with one another. (Katharine split the inheritance three ways with her brothers).

Thus, it can be said that Grandmother tried to resolve this conflict by creating a situation so hectic that her daughters-in-law would prefer to leave her sons, rather than stay and put up with her. When this didn't work, she disinherited her sons rather than accepting their wives. She had really lost control in their lives. Grandmother's unwillingness to let the "domestic cycle" run its course is what created the conflict.