Spring 5-1-2011

Ye People: Irish Travellers in Transition

Mackenzie Reiss

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YE PEOPLE
a photographic account of Irish travellers in transition

by
MACKENZIE REISS
FOREWORD

I came to Ireland, a tourist, and left, a traveler. It began innocently, as most change does, without any indication of the transformation ahead. I had been to Dublin once before, but I was with my parents then, and my view of the city had been sheltered by guidebook recommendations and four-star ratings. The real Dublin still eluded me.

I returned two years later on a school trip. I was 19 and naïve, and only completely certain about one thing: that someday I would become a great photographer. It was during a class excursion to the Travellers’ rights center, Pavee Point, that I met my first Irish Traveller. Michael Collins was a middle-aged man with tanned leathery skin and a kind face; a face that bore the signs of a working man’s life, tinged with just a hint of sadness. He worked at Pavee Point back then, and offered to show me around when I expressed an interest in seeing how modern Travellers lived.

As his van wound around corners towards the outskirts of Dublin, I questioned him about Traveller customs and history. The more information he divulged, the more I wanted to know. By the time we reached Avila Park, a Traveller-specific housing tract, I was hooked.

We pulled into the driveway of a small one-story house and Michael asked if I wanted to see the traditional Traveller wagon that his uncle was building. It was an offer I couldn’t refuse. He took me through the back gate to meet James Collins, the master builder behind the most colorful wagon I had ever seen. It was painted bright red with yellow wheels and a green cover, and detailed on the sides with flowers and horses.

Upon seeing the wagon, I realized that I couldn’t leave without photographing it, nor could I leave without documenting the Travellers in Avila Park and recording their stories. It was then that I knew this trip would be different—and it was.

Five journeys back to Ireland and countless adventures later brings us to the present. I’m 22 now, but I feel much older. I am less naïve, but still just as certain about photography. I’m also certain about one more thing: being a traveler. The English writer G.K. Chesterton put it best: “The traveler sees what he sees, the tourist sees what he has come to see.”

When I look upon a place, I see it in its entirety. For better or worse, the rose-colored glasses have come off. I photographed the Irish Travellers with the same mindset; free of judgment or embellishment. The raw honesty of the images captures the Travellers just as they are.

Photography is as much about looking outwards as it is looking inwards. In my subjects, I saw pieces of myself. The Travellers placed the same value on exploration, freedom, and family as I did. They say your best stories are the ones that you connect with on a personal level, and this work is a testament to that.

During the time I spent with the Irish Travellers of Avila Park, I drove with them to markets, accompanied them to church, walked with them in protest, and drank tea with them inside their homes.

For all the negative press that precedes Travellers, they were nothing less than exceptionally kind to me. I felt at home because of them, even though my real home was thousands of miles away. Or maybe it wasn’t. After all this time, Dublin has become something more to me than just a city— it’s become a second home.
Years ago, the open road was home to the Irish Traveller population. Today, group housing schemes and halting sites, like Avila Park, have assumed that title. But even though Travellers have moved into permanent housing, the gesture is not to be taken as an endorsement of settlement, but rather a reprieve from the hardship of life on the road.

The transition from horse and wagon to permanent residence began in the 1960s. The Irish government adopted, what Travellers dubbed, “the assimilation agenda,” which aimed to reintegrate Travellers into greater society. The government began by constructing inexpensive hut-like accommodations for Travellers, in the hope that Travellers would enjoy living there so much that they’d merge with the settled community and eventually request permanent housing.

“We were defined by the majority population as deviants; as dysfunctional people who needed to be rehabilitated and brought back into the mainstream,” explained Martin Collins, 45, the co-director of Pavee Point Travellers Centre, “I’d describe it as mass genocide without slaughter. That is effectively what was happening; they were eliminating a whole community of people, their way of life and their traditions.”

However, Travellers refused to assimilate at the expense of their culture. When the government realized this, they responded by constructing a host of higher-quality group housing developments, which are still in use today.

The worst legal assault to date on the traveling lifestyle came in 1992. For a people who only knew a life on the road, the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act came as a devastating blow. The act established a ban on roadside encampments, which effectively outlawed a key facet of Traveller culture, and forced the community to re-evaluate its terms of existence.

“Most Travellers is now livin’ in settled houses,” said Martin Collins, 24, “[Avila Park] is called a halting site, but it’s not –It’s a concentration camp, because once you’re in it, ye can’t move. They’re takin’ your dignity away.”

Despite facing such great adversity, Travellers haven’t given up traveling. They still frequent holy sites throughout Ireland, weekend markets and summer horse fairs. But there are few places for Travellers to stop along the way, and even fewer where they are gladly received. Travellers caught camping will have their caravans impounded, and boulders bar entrances to old resting sites, acting as physical reminders that Travellers are not wanted. But wanted or not, Irish Travellers are here to stay. “We have continued to survive with our culture and our identity,” said the elder Martin, “and just as importantly, with our integrity fully intact despite the best efforts of the majority population.”
Many Traveller families keep trailers in their backyards for their children to live in once they are of age.

Opposite: The Keenan family lives in a small trailer in their backyard while they wait for government-funded construction workers to repair their home. Like many other families in Avila Park, the Keenans have waited months for construction to begin, and even longer for it to be finished. In Traveller-specific housing communities, like Avila Park, residents are permitted to make requests as to the type of housing provided, but due to the large size of Traveller families, these requests aren’t always met.
Before settling in Avila Park, John Collins, lived in the traditional way with 10 brothers and sisters and his parents.

Winnie Keenan peeks through the trailer window to greet her neighbors who are also waiting for their home to be repaired.
Top: Health and nutrition are both major concerns within the Traveller community. On average, Traveller women live 11 years fewer than settled women and Traveller men live up to 15 years fewer than settled men.

Opposite: A young Traveller girl watches her friends and cousins play in the street after school.
Traveller society is patriarchal; the men are the breadwinners of the family, while the women stay at home to cook, clean, and raise the children.

Opposite: Male Travellers are given more freedom than females, who are believed to need more supervision and care.
A young Traveller boy plays in the clothesline while his mother folds laundry.

Kieran Collins watches the Cheltenham horse race with his family. Horse racing is one of the most popular betting sports among Travellers.
Top: James Collins is the master builder behind the construction of his family’s caravan, which can house up to 12 people. It took Collins a year to build the frame by hand, and to do the detailed paint-work on the caravan’s sides and tires. James cannot read and never went to school and made a living as a tinsmith before the Roads Act of 1992 barred roadside encampments for Travellers.

Opposite: James pounds a strip of tin to make a cup. The whole process takes him less than 10 minutes.
YOUTH

The changes within the Traveller community are most visible in the younger generations, who are more likely to be fluent in American pop culture than Cant, the traditional Traveller dialect. Young Travellers make up the majority of the population; approximately 63% are under the age of 25. They face many of the same problems as their elders, but also represent hope for a future of solidarity and growth.

Education for Travellers has improved substantially in the past 30 years, but there is still much room for improvement. Low retention rates and the lack of Traveller-specific education programs pose the greatest threats to the success of young students. A staggering 63.5% of Travellers drop out of school before the age of 15 and just 1.2% have college degrees. Martin Collins, 45, left school when he was only 12 years old to get a job recycling scrap iron at a local dump. “For most Travellers of that generation there wasn’t a culture of staying on in education. Nobody spoke about it, nobody thought about it,” recalled Martin, “At least I went to a mainstream school. All of my cousins went to ‘special education’, in other words, Traveller-only classes, which was the most shameful act inflicted on my people. It was institutionalized racism.”

Traveller-only schools kept Traveller students in isolation, and provided them with a highly inferior education to that of their settled peers. As a child, Winnie Keenan attended Traveller-only school. Class was conducted inside a tin shed that was sequestered behind a mainstream school. “All ages, from six to 16 would be in there together. You didn’t learn nothin’ there. There was men an’ women, 16 an’ 17 comin’ out ‘there and they couldn’t even write their own name. How did the education system help them? It didn’t.”

The majority of today’s young Travellers attend integrated schools, where they are afforded the same educational opportunities as settled children. However, one area in which all schools could improve upon is education about Traveller history. This responsibility still falls to the parents of young Travellers, who find themselves competing against modern amenities like television and pop culture. As a result, fewer and fewer Travellers are well-versed in Cant, folk songs, or traditional trades. Some fear that aspects of the culture will disappear altogether.

James Collins, of Avila Park, is the last known tinsmith in Dublin. “We used to move every year to the same area, doing tinsmithing, making cans and buckets to get few bob. That’s gone. That trade is gone,” said James. Sadly, none of the young people in Avila Park have demonstrated a serious interest in tinsmithing. If no one steps up before James passes, the secrets of the trade will die with him.
Samantha Collins joins friends on the grounds of a Traveller-specific preschool in Avila Park on weekday afternoons. She feels safe playing amongst other Travellers because she won’t be subjected to discriminatory name-calling.
Michael Collins, 13, picks at a mural outside the preschool that has been defaced. The Equal Status Act passed in 2000, granting Travellers legal grounds to file suit against discriminators, but that hasn’t stopped local vandals, from demonstrating their opposition.

A young Traveller fields the ball during an afternoon game of “Curbs.”
Top: A young Traveller displays his Irish pride on St. Patrick’s Day.
Bottom: The wall of the preschool in Avila Park is marred by anti-Traveller ethnic slurs: “Pikey”, “knacker”, and “cream cracker” are among the most contemptuous terms used against Travellers.
Opposite: Patrick Collins, 5, plays in a construction site at Avila Park. More than five homes within the park underwent extensive renovations in 2009 to remedy problems with heating, insulation and space allocation. For months, these families lived inside backyard trailers as they waited for the repairs to be completed.
Margaret Collins plays with an old riding crop she found in her backyard.

Debbie and Samantha Collins tackle each other in the preschool playground long after the staff has gone home.
Top: Paddy Collins, 7, spends an afternoon at the schoolyard in Avila Park. Although he plays comfortably among Traveller friends, derogatory scribbles of “Pikey,” which have defaced the playground, are a constant reminder of the subjugation his people.  

Bottom: “Curbs” is a popular street game for Traveller children, who aim is to bounce the ball off the apex of the sidewalk in order to be declared the winner.

Bare-knuckle boxing was once used as a means to solve conflict between two Traveller families. The tradition still exists, but today’s Travellers are gravitating towards a more controlled variation of the sport. Boys as young as age seven are encouraged to train, fight, and eventually compete at rings in Dublin county.
Samantha Collins peers into the preschool window. Education for Travellers has improved significantly over the past 30 years, but low retention rates are still a major problem for the community. The majority of Travellers leave school before the age of 15.
Ireland during the 1950s was a kinder place to Irish Travellers. They moved across the country by horse and wagon, camping on the side of the road for a few weeks at a time before moving onto the next county. In the old days, Travellers were welcomed by the settled community as partners in trade. They swapped tin buckets and pans for food and supplies, shared a cup of tea, and continued on their way.

“I miss the traveling life,” said James Collins, “I grew up on the side of the road, traveling around the country in a barrel top wagon and a couple horses, with children and my parents—there was 7 of us.”

Those days are gone. When plastic was introduced in the 1970s, the art of tinsmithing died out, and the settled people’s appreciation for Traveller culture died with it. Generations of craftsmen were suddenly forced to adapt to changing technologies or face unemployment.

Without trade to support themselves, Travellers have had to make the difficult transition into the settled workforce. The discrimination against Travellers is so severe that they must hide their identities in order to secure a job. Martin Collins, 24, drove a tractor for Dublin City Corporation until it was discovered that he was a Traveller. His employer only offered this in explanation: “There is no more work for ye here,” before Martin was abruptly let go. Travellers have taken to selling odds and ends at markets and fairs because, according to Martin, Travellers have no other choice.

Michael Collins began working at the markets as a teenager, and has made an honest living doing so. He even turned down a full-time position at Pavee Point because he didn’t want to give up his weekends away, buying and selling. But not all Travellers who set up shop fare as well, and some resort to drug dealing to make fast money. “You have younger lads in their 20s and 30s who are doing drugs, selling drugs, and they have houses worth €300,000,” said Michael, “That’s all from drugs. I’d rather have nothing than live off the proceeds of drugs.” Michael keeps his two sons from experimenting with illegal substances by educating them about the ramifications of drug use, and taking them for monthly blood tests.

The causes of rising drug use within the Traveller community include: unemployment, discrimination, depression, and increased contact with the settled majority. According to Winnie Keenan, drug use has become an increasingly visible problem among Travellers, “Sometimes you see the white [from cocaine use] and it’s in your face. They can’t see beyon’ anythin’ else,” said Keenan, “Maybe they take drugs to feel a bit better or decide that’s a way out. It’s sad that it’s come to that.” Travellers’ rights groups, like Pavee Point, offer employment and drug education programs to help remedy the problem. Their efforts are just the beginning of what needs to be done to forge a healthy and economically stable Traveller society.
A flower vendor pokes his head out to scout out potential customers. The turnout was unfortunately low due to a steady morning rain that kept the crowds away.

**Top:** Michael Collins updates a friend on the state of the markets in Wexford—just South of Dublin—where settled and Traveller alike, converge on weekends to sell their wares.

**Middle:** Used clothing is a popular item on sale at Traveller markets.

**Bottom:** Customers browse a display of mechanical parts.
Traveller men take great pride in the condition and upkeep of their vehicles—the modern equivalent of a horse and wagon in the traveling community.
Martin Collins, 24, examines his hands which are covered in grime from working with a chisel and hammer all afternoon.

Martin breaks down the wood framing of an old trailer and burns the remains in a fire pit in his father’s yard.
Michael Collins has been working at markets since he was a teenager, and enjoys staying in touch with the traditional Traveller way of life.

Travellers take a reprieve from the hassles of buying and selling by drinking a cup of “market tea.” The tea is brewed inside their trailers, and often accompanied by a cigarette or two.
Michael Collins heads home from a weekend selling mechanical parts at a local flea market. He says that although times are tough financially and socially for Travelers, it’s not something he would ever be ashamed of. “If I went looking for a job tomorrow morning, I would put on my application that I’m a member of the traveling community. I wouldn’t hide that for nobody,” said Michael. “If they didn’t want to give me the job, fair enough, but I believe if your qualifications are good enough and your standard of readin’ and writin’ is good, I can’t see why you wouldn’t be offered the job because you’re a Traveller.”

Travellers in Avila Park observe construction workers while they build a wall to surround the community grotto. A grotto is a cave-like structure built to house statues of Catholic saints.
Early one December morning more than 100 Irish Travellers took to the streets of Dublin to march in support of Travellers’ human rights. They also hoped to raise awareness about the lack of government assistance to improve the standard of living for the traveling community.

Even though Travellers have their own traditions, common heritage, and language, the Irish government refuses to recognize them as an ethnic minority, thereby delegitimizing their culture. Unfortunately, this type of discrimination is not unprecedented for Travellers, who come from a long history of confronting prejudice and racism.

The distinct “broken” Traveller accent, nomadic lifestyle, and tradition of intermarriage are used as justifications for social alienation. In Dublin, these unique characteristics of Traveller society are not recognized as differences, but as flaws. “You’re always tryin’ to speak out, but ya think, do ya ever get heard?,” said Winnie Keenan, 47. “What’s changin’? Very little. Ya know, the conditions that Travellers are livin’ in is appalling. Rats wouldn’t live in these places. And this is 2009.”

Travellers also face discrimination from local businesses, and even public services such as schools and hospitals. When Keenan tried to register as a patient at a Dublin hospital, the attendant said to her: “No. We have enough of ye’ here.” To date, Keenan has found only two doctors in Dublin who are willing to see Travellers. Many hotels and pubs will flat out refuse to serve Travellers, and shopkeepers follow them around the store, keeping track of their every move.

Travellers are known in polite speech as “gypsies”, “tinkers”, or “pavee.” However, a variety of derogatory terms have also fallen into common usage, including: “pikey”, “knacker”, and “cream cracker.” To encourage solidarity and equality amongst Traveller and settled people, Travellers’ rights groups, like Pavee Point, have begun lecturing at schools to educate future generations on the history and customs of the Traveller community.

The role of government has been one of exacerbation; in doing little to nothing, the status quo of marginalization has persisted for generations. Irish Travellers are the largest ethnic minority group in Ireland, and also the most discriminated against.

“Why can Travellers not just be proud of who they are and not have to hide their identity? Why?” said Keenan. “That’s what I hope to see change- That you are accepted for who you are and that you can walk in and say, ‘Yea, I’m a Traveller and I’m proud of it.’”
A horse is hitched to James Collins' finished wagon, which will be driven into the center of Dublin to raise awareness for Travellers' human rights.

Starting at 9 a.m., entire families assemble on the streets of Avila Park to observe the preparations for the march into Dublin.
Some Travellers choose to hide their identity because of discrimination, while others display it with pride.

The crowd of protestors is stopped and questioned by a local garda officer. After a brief interrogation, the Travellers are allowed to continue down the road. Irish citizens have the right to engage in peaceful protests.
Travellers march down O’Connell Street bearing signs that call for government action and equality for Irish Travellers.

The Spire is an icon of modern Dublin, and stands at 398 feet tall, making it the world’s largest sculpture.