

2 in Valley have a special link to Irish past

By John Faherty

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KELLIE HWANG/HANDOUT

Julia Devous (left), Patricia DeHesus and Teresa Smith-DeHesus stand over the unmarked grave of their ancestor, Annie Moore, in New York.

Annie Moore was just another Irish girl who came to America, part of an ongoing immigration to this country during the 19th century.

But Moore earned a special place in history because, when she arrived on Jan. 1, 1882, she was the first person to be processed on Ellis Island in New York Harbor. A bronze statue of her holding her hat now sits on the island.

Today, two of her great-granddaughters will march at the front of the annual St. Patrick's Day parade in New York City.

Julia Devous of Peoria and Teresa Smith-DeHesus of Mesa will march down Fifth Avenue as part of a correc-

tion of a historic mistake.

"It's just absolutely daunting. Daunting and invigorating," great-granddaughter Smith-DeHesus said this week from New York. "To be her descendant is wonderful."

For decades, people believed that Annie Moore, who immigrated at 15, eventually left New York and moved to Texas, where she was killed by a streetcar.

It's not clear where that myth started, but for decades it was accepted as fact.

The relatives of the Texas Annie Moore enjoyed some fame as the descendants of the first person to arrive at what became known as America's

See IRISH Page A28

IRISH BY THE NUMBERS

34 million:

Number of U.S. residents who claim Irish ancestry.

10.8: Percentage of U.S. residents who claim Irish ancestry.**2nd:** Where Irish-Americans rank in the U.S. behind German-Americans.**10.2:** Percentage of Arizonans who claim Irish ancestry.

Source: 2000 U.S. census data

Special link to Ellis Island

IRISH

Continued from A1

gateway.

There was just one problem with that story: It wasn't true.

Last year, a genealogist, Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak, in cooperation with the commissioner of records for New York City, began looking for relatives of Moore.

But all their work kept pointing to the fact that the Moore who died in Texas was born in Illinois, not County Cork in Ireland.

They went deeper into records and eventually learned that Irish Annie Moore never left New York City.

She married a German-American baker, lived a humble life and eventually died and was buried in an unmarked grave in Queens in 1924.

Moore had 11 children. Only five reached adulthood, but those children had children. And then those children had children.

That last group of kids includes Devous and Smith-DeHesus, who knew who Annie Moore was, but just barely.

"On Labor Day, Megan Smolenyak called my sister and said, 'Hi, I'm a genealogist. Is your dad Jack Smith?'" Devous said.

That was when the three sisters learned of their connection

Annie Moore project

The relatives of Annie Moore were thrilled to learn of their ancestor but not happy to realize that she remains buried in an unmarked grave.

Now, they are trying to raise money for a tombstone and a historic marker for her.

For more information, send your questions to info@anniemoore.net.

To make a tax-deductible contribution, send a check to the Irish Cultural and Learning Foundation:

Annie Moore
Memorial Project
c/o Irish Cultural and
Learning Foundation
1106 N. Central Ave.
Phoenix, AZ 85004

to history.

This week, they visited the unmarked grave of their ancestor.

"Oh, my God, it was amazing," Devous said. "We felt like we were standing on hallowed ground. We were very touched, we were honored. It was wonderful."

The third sister, Pam, lives in Wisconsin, has young children and was unable to make the trip.

Commissioner Brian An-

dersson of the Department of Records for New York City drove the women and their mother to the gravesite.

He spoke by phone as he was leaving the Queens cemetery.

"To do something so steeped in history is nice," Andersson said. "The first person at Ellis Island. She wasn't the first Irish girl, she wasn't the last, but still, as a historian, it's pretty awesome."

Also visiting the gravesite was Patricia DeHesus, the sisters' mother and the former wife of Annie Moore's grandson.

"I never had any idea whatsoever. Neither did he," DeHesus said. "When I married Jack, he was just a very likable, very garrulous Irishman. He always said his family was right off the boat. But it was just an expression."

The marriage between DeHesus and Smith did not last, but the three daughters from that marriage are now part of an interesting historical tale: They are the direct descendants of an iconic immigrant.

Smith-DeHesus thinks that comes with a responsibility.

"We are trying to do our best to honor it," she said. "We are immigrants and Americans."

Reach the reporter at john.faherty@arizona-republic.com.