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Some have it that the Irish built New York. In the case of Jim Rodgers's family it could be said to be literally true.

His great-great-grandfather Cornelius Gallagher established a business empire that, among other achievements, provided most of the sand that was used in the construction of Manhattan north of 14th street and it made him extraordinarily wealthy.

"He was a billionaire in modern terms," Rodgers estimated of an ancestor who was 85 when he died in 1932.

"The charm of his character was his thorough naturalness, [and] perhaps it was this that carried him so triumphantly through his career," said an obituary published by the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick. "In all, he was a lovable character and an affectionate friend."

If this Famine-era immigrant born to a Donegal family wasn't exactly "old money," he was based in a part of Long Island that suggested he was. The patriarch had an address at East 38th Street in Manhattan, but summered at Port Washington on the North Shore with his wife Annie, his children and their families.

"This was a time when only a very few old WASP families went out to the Hamptons," said Rodgers, the married father of two teenage children.

Instead, the action was on the North Shore. The newly affluent and famous, like F. Scott Fitzgerald, lived on Great Neck, which the novelist fictionalized as "West Egg" in "The Great Gatsby." But he did go to parties across the bay on the Sands Point peninsula, or old-moneyed "East Egg" in the novel, which is where the love of Gatsby's life, Daisy Buchanan, grew up and where the real-life Gallaghers were based.

"This was someone whom I was interested in since I was 15," he said of the "Gatsby" author. When he read biographies as an adult, he saw a possible connection to his family.



The patriarch Cornelius Gallagher left Ireland when he was a child in the mid-19th century. Left: Peter C. Gallagher Sr., his wife Mimi and family about 1912. His elder son, Peter, is standing in the middle.

Sidewalks of New York

DYNASTY WAS BUILT ON SAND, GRAVEL

"I like to think that Fitzgerald went to the Gallaghers," he said, referring primarily to the home of his great-grandfather Peter and his wife Mimi.

"They were a colorful family that partied for 100 years, because there was always money," Rodgers said of the Gallagher clan. "They knew how to make money and they knew how to spend it."

"They were a family of raconteurs," he added. By the time he came along the stories remained, but the money, for the most part, had been spent.

Rodgers is a downtown Manhattan lawyer who has completed two as yet unpub-

lished novels. A popular reader at both the Irish American Writers & Artists salon and its spinoff Artists Without Walls, he writes about his world and what he knows. And while he's fascinated by and feels close to the Gallaghers, he hasn't been tempted to fictionalize their sprawling multi-generational story. For one thing, it might be a little too melodramatic for his literary style.

In or around 1926, his great-grandfather Peter C. Gallagher Sr. died in circumstances that were never made public. There were two main conflicting stories or theories. One was that he fell or was pushed in front of

a subway train. The other, passed on to Rodgers by his mother, rings truer for him. In that version, Peter fell and hit his head off of the side of a yacht during a fight with one of his three brothers. One point of tension was Mimi, Peter's wife, whom the brother had once loved, too.

The widowed Mimi (formerly Alice Mae Murray), who was born into an allied clan involved in the business, became the matriarch after Cornelius and Annie passed away. She made sure that her two sons -- Rodgers's grandfather Peter C. Gallagher Jr. and John Murray Gallagher -- would assume key

roles in the running of the business.

A generation later, after Peter's death in the late 1950s, the neighbors on the North Shore said: "Enough!"

Rodgers said: "They [the Gallaghers] had stripped the dunes at Port Washington." Articles in the local press ran with headlines like "The rape of the sand dunes."

EMPHASIS ON FUN

HIS mother's brothers and her cousins sold Gallagher Brothers Sand & Gravel in 1960 and went into the shipyard business. That went bankrupt in the 1990s, but some family members made a "tidy sum" by selling the lease of the dry dock and shipyard to IKEA for its store at Red Hook in Brooklyn.

Rodgers's mother, the former Helen "Chickie" Gallagher, grew up in the 1930s and '40s, spending one part of the year in Palm Beach, Fla., and the other in New York. She went to elite Catholic schools in both places.

The Gallaghers belonged to a group of wealthy Irish Catholic families on the Upper East Side that had intermarried and were otherwise interconnected over the generations.

The emphasis was always on fun. "My mother's was the last generation to enjoy that lifestyle," Rodgers said. During Chickie Gallagher's high school and college days, parties often meant 20 or more friends staying overnight.

"I thought she'd exaggerated some of it, but a friend of hers confirmed to me it was all true," he added.

The Gallaghers had servants, of course, including a chauffeur named Eddie Dillon, whose body, when his time came, was entombed in the Gallagher plot. Rodgers later learned that the family retainer he knew as a child had changed his name from Halpern to avoid discrimination as a driver.

"The family claimed he was the only Jew buried in Calvary," he said.

Chickie met her future husband, James H. Rodgers Jr., in Westhampton, where the family had been spending its summers since the late 1940s. He was from a Catholic family in New Jersey of English, Scottish and Irish heritage. "His father had a company, but they weren't wealthy like the Gallaghers," said his son. The young couple married in 1955.

"My father really loved and respected the Gallaghers," Jim Rodgers Jr. said.

Rodgers Sr. was sorry that his seven children didn't know his parents-in-law -- they both died in their 50s -- but he was a keen observer who could relate what he'd seen and heard. And his wife, brothers-in-laws and sisters-in-laws were there, too, and so the storytelling and the laughter continued.

"Thanksgiving was always with the Gallagher family,"



Peter C. Gallagher Jr., his wife Helen, and family in 1949.



A barge owned by the Goodwin-Gallagher Sand and Gravel Corporation.