

Living through Lockdown with Anna

by Melanie McCabe

Two women I have not seen since we were girls scaled the dusty metal side of a dumpster and waded into what had been tossed there. They braved the grime and mold and dangerous edges to salvage what they were seeking, what had been promised to them and then withheld. Sifting through the linens deemed too shabby to donate, the dishes and glassware with their jagged memories of usefulness, they excavated the photographs that years before had been entrusted to Margaret.

Margaret was my aunt, my father's only sister, and when she died in 1986, she left dozens of family photos in her home with her now-widowed husband Harold who—I am told—hated all of us. Referred to us, sneeringly, as “you McCabes” as though this were a damning epithet and forced her to sneak and lie whenever she made visits to her family.

The two women were my cousins. Their oldest sister told me the tale of that eleventh-hour reclamation that had occurred decades before—and then sent me a disc that contained all of the images. She had begged Harold for years to send the photos, but—spiteful or lazy—he had not complied. A Christmas card she sent to him in 1990 was returned, stamped “Deceased”—the only word received that he had died. The estate lawyer also refused to turn over the photos and so my cousins had swooped in before the priceless archive of “those McCabes” could be sent to the dump or burned.

I clicked through image after image of family members I knew almost nothing about. Was it chance or luck that this treasure came into my possession on the eve of a pandemic that would shut down my world and cut me off from normal contact with all of the living members of my family?

One image called to me more than the others. It was a fading photograph of my great-great-grandmother, Anna Patterson McCabe. Black curls frame a pale face,

tipped slightly as though awaiting the answer to a question, and the eyes that fix on mine are plaintive. Sad.

Abruptly, on March 13, 2020, I found myself with no one with whom to spend my days, and so I spent them instead looking for Anna.

That March night as I retreated upstairs for a fitful sleep and strange dreams, I didn't yet understand how utterly alone I was. The school where I taught was closing until after spring break. I didn't know then that in only ten days, it would be shuttered for the remainder of the academic year.

My two daughters lived far away. As lockdowns were announced, everyone began to cobble for themselves a new way of living. On social media, I scrolled through post after post of families concocting new recipes, housemates huddled over board games, couples cuddling together to watch Netflix. Of course, there were also posts about the virus, about sudden illnesses and horrifying deaths. But all those recipe-followers, game players, and sofa cuddlers had one up on me as they processed the daily onslaught of Covid news: they didn't have to face it alone.

Anna surely must have felt alone when she left her home in Ireland and traveled first to London and then, in 1856, to the United States. She was leaving behind everything she knew—her home in County Monaghan, her parents, her brothers. She made a decision when she was fifteen that would alter the course of her life. At that age, I was kissed for the first time by a boy named James. I was green and untried and foolishly besotted and would have followed him anywhere had he truly wanted me. What a disaster that would have been. Was Anna at fifteen any different than I?

She was a girl when she married my great-great-grandfather William. He was twice her age. What parents today would consent to their teenage daughter taking up with a man in his thirties? By 1852, William had spirited her away from her family to London, where she gave birth to my great-grandfather Cyrus in 1853. She was seventeen years old.

I was twenty-eight when my first child was born. I was surrounded and supported by my husband, my family, and my friends. How lonely it must have been to give birth, far from the home you knew, with only your husband to lean on.

As she grew closer to her due date, less able to move about in a world that expected pregnant women to be invisible, the four walls surrounding her must have felt more like a prison than a home. Cyrus was born at the end of January, so likely the bitterness of the London winter pinned her inside as much as did her pregnancy. Did she sit at a rain-spattered, wind-buffeted window and miss the past? Did she wonder what lay before her? Her husband dreamed of fleeing to America—even farther from her family than she already was.

As her son kicked inside the tightening confines of her womb, ready to escape what held him in, did she wish for escape herself?

Or am I projecting my own longings and loneliness on this woman whose story I can only tell through the lens of my own?

Several weeks into lockdown, I started to see articles about how much human beings need physical touch to be fully healthy—and how stressful it can be to live without it. Most people I knew still had their daily ration of hugs and hand-holding, but those of us living alone had to make do with phone calls and Zoom. Would I become like those pitiful orphanage babies I had read about who failed to thrive because they were seldom picked up, cradled, held?

In the past I had depended on regular physical exercise to keep anxiety at bay. Now my aerobics classes were canceled. I needed an endorphin rush and so I began dancing. Alone. In the privacy of my locked-down house. I'd click on an oldies station, finding escape and solace in songs I remembered from my younger years. Most days, it helped. But music comes with risks. Not every tune is upbeat, not every oldie brings happy memories.

Listening to a song that makes you cry is a harmless catharsis when you're living a normal life. But I wasn't living anything close to a normal life. And so I danced. But vigilantly. And at night, when I couldn't sleep, I hunted for clues that would help me to

understand Anna. My own life was in suspended animation. The future was uncertain and only the past seemed real.

When Anna boarded the President Fillmore in 1856 bound for New York, she was far along in her third pregnancy. Another son, Thomas, had been born in London, swiftly following her firstborn, Cyrus, and now she was pregnant for the third time in four years.

Perhaps she thought there would be time to get to America before the baby was born. But the ship manifest indicates that James was born on ship, two months old by the time they arrived at Castle Garden. Anna endured childbirth in what were surely cramped and unpleasant conditions, and then began a new life with three young sons, one just an infant.

They settled in Winona, Minnesota with the intention of farming. They owned one cow, three working oxen, and two pigs. Was Anna happy with her lot? I have no way of knowing.

But the census of 1857 reveals something intriguing. In the house next to theirs lived a married man named Clinton Hodge, listed as a house painter. Some twenty years later, Mr. Hodge would become Anna's second husband—he would lie to her, steal from her, and break her heart. I know more than a little about men like that.

If I had long ago written a life plan for myself, surely my predictions for the year 2020-2021 would look nothing like they turned out to be. I should have had beside me a husband of several decades. We should be planning overseas trips, perhaps entertaining grandchildren on overnight visits.

I didn't count on living alone. And I surely didn't count on being afraid of venturing out into the world. Everyone has his or her own threshold of risk tolerance. I know many people have one far higher than my own. I see their unmasked party photos. I pass them as they drink and laugh in crowded outdoor cafes. Each time I feel the whipsaw of conflicted feelings: my disapproval of the chances they are taking—and my envy at their carefree abandon, the fear that I have let Covid make me a prisoner.

After my vaccines took full effect in March, I had begun to emerge into the world again.

And then came Delta, bringing my hopeful forays to a grinding halt. I was once again locked down inside my four walls. But this lockdown was self-imposed. This time I didn't feel a part of a wide-sweeping community effort to limit viral spread. I felt like the only one who couldn't move on.

The Civil War broke out in the spring of 1861. Two more sons were born, but Willie, the youngest, died at age seven in 1869 and then, in the winter of 1875, Anna's husband also died, leaving her a widow at the age of thirty-nine. By today's standards, she was still a young woman. Surely she must have been unwilling to resign herself to widowhood and old age.

The farm and their livestock were sold off to settle debts and she and her four remaining sons moved to Rochester, Minnesota, where the three oldest boys started a house-painting business.

What gave them the idea to go into this line of work? Was Anna still in contact with her neighbor from 1857, Mr. Hodge, who had worked as a house painter? Did he send word that he could help the boys begin a business? Given what I know now, it seems likely.

My grandfather had recorded that Anna had married a Mr. Hodge in 1878 and then divorced him. No first name was provided. I had searched for years to find evidence of the marriage. Then one night I stumbled on a marriage record for an Annie McCabe in Buffalo County, Wisconsin in 1879. The groom was not listed, but I took a chance and ordered it anyway. My gamble paid off. I had found Clinton Hodge.

Immediately, I searched Minnesota's historical newspaper site and the two hits that came up were shockers. It turns out he was never *legally* Anna's husband. The splashy headline in *The Rochester Post* of August 15, 1879, was eye-catching: "BIGAMIST AND DEADBEAT. Clinton Hodge Deserts His First Wife and Children—Marries Again—Dabbles in Real Estate in Rochester, and Then Robs and Deserts His Second Wife."

On the pretext of traveling to Wisconsin to sell some property, Clinton persuaded Anna to dispose of her watch and chain as well as a great deal of her furniture, to fund his trip. He told her that he owned a furnished hotel in Chippewa Falls and would replace the furniture with some a great deal better. Off he went, just a couple of months after their wedding—and never returned. For a short while, he was believed to have drowned, but then an investigation turned up the truth. Hodge owned no property of any kind, but he did have a wife and children he had deserted, still living in Eau Claire.

The pain and anger that Anna surely felt upon learning that she had been betrayed must have been overwhelming. On top of that, she also had to grapple with the shame of having that betrayal so publicly aired in the newspaper—of knowing that her neighbors were whispering about her behind their hands. There is a jagged kind of shame that comes with being played for a fool. I know what that is like.

If my ambition was to write twangy country songs of heartbreak, my life would provide ample material. If no one had been privy to those heartaches but me, I might have nursed my wounds in solitude and moved on. But there were always onlookers. Neighbors. Colleagues. The parents of my daughters' friends. There was nowhere to hide. Or rather there was nowhere to hide the outward truths, the broken relationships, that all the world could see. What remained hidden were the reasons why. The truths that absolved me, that I couldn't share.

Anna made a terrible decision in choosing to marry Clinton. No doubt she was lonely and struggling financially. At first I thought that he must have misled her with his charm or good looks or efforts to help her sons. Perhaps he seemed—on the surface—like a good catch.

I researched the wife he had abandoned in Eau Claire and made an intriguing discovery. She had remarried! How could that be if she was still married to Clinton? Had there been a divorce? And if there had, didn't that mean that Clinton was not a bigamist, as the article claimed?

I pursued more facts and uncovered an information gold mine. Clinton's wife Nancy filed for and was granted a divorce in the summer of 1870, claiming he verbally

abused her with “harsh, indecent, obscene and vile names and epithets...in the presence of their children and neighbors” and “repeatedly threatened” to take her life, to kick her out of doors, to beat and flog her. This, she maintained, was true of their entire seventeen-year marriage.

Anna lived next door to this pair in 1857. If this sort of abuse was ongoing in the Hodge marriage, it seems likely that she might have occasionally overheard some ugly words or witnessed some angry scenes. Yet Anna married him when he asked her in 1879. Either she was ignorant of his past misdeeds or he had somehow coerced her into overlooking them.

As I mull over these tantalizing facts and speculations about people who lived some 150 years ago, it occurs to me to wonder what someone 150 years from today might make of my own life. Looking only at the records that remain, I can imagine that future researcher making some assumptions that would be spectacularly off the mark.

When I discovered the Hodge divorce case, I thought that I had cleared Clinton of the charge of bigamy. But I was wrong about that. I hadn't yet found out about Almeda.

I discovered a legal summons published in a Wisconsin newspaper in 1882. A woman named Almeda Hodge was listed as the plaintiff and the defendant was none other than Anna's heartbreaker, Clinton. He was summoned to appear in court in Chippewa Falls, and so I again went prospecting for information.

Clinton married Almeda in February of 1871—only five months after his divorce from Nancy in Eau Claire. One of Clinton's co-workers had depicted him as both a drunk and a frequenter of brothels. How did this lowlife continue to reel in women willing to marry him?

Clinton deserted Almeda in January of 1878—in time for him to return to Minnesota and court Anna. Had he somehow gotten word that her husband had died? Did he have any special interest in Anna—or was she just in the wrong place at the wrong time, one of any number of women he could have chosen to take advantage of?

After Clinton deserted her, Almeda received a letter from “a woman residing in Rochester, Minnesota,” claiming he had married and deserted her, as well. Clearly, Anna had heard about the summons and wrote to share what she knew. One forsaken woman to another—victims of the same man. What I wouldn’t give to obtain a copy of the letter Anna wrote or the one that Almeda wrote in response.

I have my own share of regrets. I regret that I did not try harder to hang on to my first marriage to the father of my daughters. That was a mistake—and every subsequent failed relationship was a new exclamation point on that first wrong turn. And so I have empathy for Anna. Her choice of Clinton was spectacularly worse than any choice I ever made, but we both suffered through the humiliation of having our failures play out in front of prying eyes.

She didn’t give up on finding happiness, however. Her next marriage was to a seemingly good and decent man, but this marriage, too, would end abruptly. And when it did, the rest of her life would be a downward spiral, ending in a way that shocked me when I discovered it.

Anna married George Townsend in June of 1884, five years after the summer of shame she endured when Clinton abandoned her. It seems she could not have found a finer fellow. According to an account in *The Rochester Post*, George was “an honorable and upright man, quiet, retiring and confiding in disposition, charitable and benevolent ...” He was a widowed farmer, seventy-four years old—old enough to be her father, but surely a welcome change from Clinton.

More bad luck was in store for Anna, though. The two were married less than a year when George suffered a terrible accident, fracturing several ribs and sustaining internal injuries. He died soon after.

Because George died intestate, Anna was left with nothing and by 1895, she was living with her sons Thomas and Robert who had both married and had six small children between them. It must have been very crowded quarters. Perhaps Anna’s new daughters-in-law were not pleased with the living arrangements. Perhaps tempers began to fray.

I knew from my grandfather's records that Anna had died in November of 1910 at the age of seventy-five. When I found her listed in the 1910 census, I expected to see her still living with her sons. So I was shocked to find her listed among names I had never seen before—each of them described as “inmates.” Anna was a patient at the Rochester State Hospital, an institution for the care of the insane. She had been sent there from the Olmsted County Poor Farm—a place for the destitute and forsaken, many of them elderly. How she ended up there when she still had three healthy, working sons was something I needed to understand.

I had heard stories from my cousin about various mental conditions in the family history. Anna's son, Cyrus, my great-grandfather, was referred to as a melancholic, with a history of moodiness. In a memoir, my father described Cyrus as “a man of dour visage” and added, “I do not recall his ever laughing and seldom did he smile.” Cyrus's son, my grandfather, by all accounts was a lively, fun-loving man until a painful and debilitating condition stole the pleasure from his life. He became addicted to painkilling medication and at one point, ended up hospitalized because of the behavioral changes this addiction had caused.

Given the family history, I was unsettled to learn that Anna had been diagnosed as insane. I know that this term was used widely in the 19th century, and was applied not only to people with mental conditions, but to women whose behavior was viewed as being outside the bounds of acceptable feminine decorum.

Sequestered in my house during the lonely months of lockdown, I made a conscious effort to stay in touch with family and friends, via phone and Zoom, to ward off any tendency in me to go off the rails due to excessive solitude. My overactive imagination conjured melodramatic images of myself wandering the house late at night, wringing my hands and babbling to the walls. I decided that I needed to find out as much as I could about why Anna's life had ended as tragically as it did.

I paid a Minnesota historian to find records of Anna's stay at the Rochester State Hospital. I didn't have high hopes that any documents still existed and so was elated to have a multi-page file turn up that answered some questions and raised still more.

Anna was admitted to the hospital in 1906 and so she spent her final four years, locked up, apart from her family. Most likely, today she would have been diagnosed with dementia, but then it seems one was either normal or a raging lunatic. In late 1905, she began experiencing delusions and speaking incoherently, though these episodes were intermittent and she still had periods where she was entirely rational. She was called “obdurate, unreasonably ungovernable.” The admitting form indicated that she had “always been of irritable, uncontrolled temper.”

Was this so? This verdict was made by a county employee who surely had not known Anna when she was young. How had she managed to marry three husbands if she was such an unpleasant person? And yet, at some point her sons must have decided she was more than they could handle.

I appreciate how hard it might be to live with and care for someone who is delusional and angry. But I can’t help wondering what led all of her sons to throw up their hands and shirk their duty to the woman who raised them. Had my great-grandfather, Cyrus, felt guilty at abandoning her to such an end? Did anyone visit her while she was in the hospital or did she live out her last days alone?

Was Anna truly as disturbed as the records claim—or was she simply angry about the way that her life had turned out? I could understand that feeling. Underneath my quiet acceptance of lockdown life, I was angry, too.

My eyebrows lifted when I first read the term “ungovernable.” Who was it that wanted to govern her? What had been expected of her that she was unwilling or unable to deliver?

Anna was inconvenient, and so she was locked away.

Maybe that is why her story haunts me, especially now.

These days, I, too, sometimes feel invisible.

The pandemic prompted me to retire from my teaching career two years earlier than I had planned. Though I don’t miss the countless hours spent grading papers, I do miss my students, the hallway chats with colleagues, the occasional joy of feeling like I had succeeded with a stubborn student. I miss the feeling that my life had purpose and worth.

Now I spend most days alone and though I keep busy with my writing, I feel untethered from the Melanie that I used to be. I'm not entirely sure who this new version of me is. Sometimes I worry what will become of her.

I wonder if Anna felt something similar. Was she aware enough to know that her life had taken a dramatically unfortunate turn? Did she lie awake in her bed and miss happier days when her children were young—or earlier days still when she was an unencumbered girl in County Monaghan?

I spent last Thanksgiving and Christmas with my family. I dare to hope that there is light on the horizon, despite the day-to-day unpredictability of this pandemic. But I am acutely aware that this experience has changed me, has altered the future I move toward, has sometimes filled me with anxiety, rage, and despair.

Through the hardships she encountered throughout her life and in the last years when she was locked away from any life at all, Anna must have felt all those emotions, as well. Time and circumstances have silenced her, though I have been listening hard for whatever she wanted to say.

I have a voice that wants to share what has become of my life. Once, so did Anna. With these words, I am trying to lift both of them.



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