

West Cork: Stories of the Revolution, 1916-1923

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I would like to thank my grandmother for telling me the following story about her mother's life during 1916-1923.

My Great-Grandmother's name is Helena O'Neill she lived in "Ardacrow House", Ardacrow, Kilbrittain, Co. Cork. They were dairy farmers, with hens, geese, ducks and they grew hay, corn and wheat - at this time all farming was manual work. She was the youngest daughter of John and Ellen O'Neill and she had three sisters named Nora Frances, Mary Kate and Annie.

I was so surprised to hear about my Great- Grandmother and her involvement in the Irish Revolution and how hard her life was during these years. (I will refer to my Great- Grandmother by her name "Helena" for the story I'm about to tell you).

In 1915 one of Helena's sister Nora Frances died from TB. There was no cure for TB at this time and many people in Ireland died from it. It left her family heart broken and her mother Ellen who never got over it. Unfortunately in late autumn in 1916 Helena's mother Ellen contracted the Black Flu and was bed sickened. Just like TB at this the time there was no cure for this awful disease. While being nursed and cared for by her husband and two daughters - Helena and Annie, her husband John contracted the Black Flu in December. Unfortunately it took him very quickly and he died on the 31 Dec 1916 and Ellen died less than a week after him on the 06 Jan 1917.

During this time Helena's older sister Mary Kate was living and working with their aunt Mary-Ann O'Neill who was the owner of a public house in Kinsale

which was later known as "The Hole in the Wall Bar". During the year of 1916 Mary Kate fell in love with English soldier named Archie Perrier who was fighting with the Black and Tans and he was based in Kinsale. Mary Kate could not tell her parents about her relationship with this English soldier as her father was a strong republican. Mary Kate loved her family and did not want to break her father's heart so she kept her relationship a secret. After the death of her parents Mary Kate married Archie in secret in Kinsale. They later moved to England where they lived very happy ever after.

The O'Neill's of Ardacrow were involved in the revolution and "Ardacrow House" was known as a safe house for the IRA. After the death of Helena's parents who was only 21 years old at this time she and her sister Annie work the farm themselves. It was very unusual at the time to have two young women working a farm with no man in the house. They would have to plough the fields, set the corn and wheat in the fields and harvest the hay and straw. They had to milk the cows by hand and feed all the other animals on the farm. While doing this Helena was very involved in the Kilbriann Cumann na mBan. She would run many errands for the IRA, from passing messages from one man to another, to informing the IRA if the Black and Tans were around.

Between 1916-1923 the Black and Tans would call to "Ardacrow House" many times. If the door was not opened to the Black and Tans, when they knocked at it, they would shoot at it. My Grandmother told me that she remembers growing up in the house as a little girl seeing the bullet marks on the door and being told the story of how they got there. Once the Black and Tans got into the house they would count how many chairs were in the kitchen or how many cups were on the table or in the sink and would ask how many people are in the house. If there were more chairs or cups on the table they would interrogate Helena and her sister. They would also try and see if there were any cigarette butts lying around the house and in the farm yard and just like the chairs and tea cups in the house they would demand how many people are in the house or farm yard and if there are any farm helpers and demand who are they were and where are they. The Black and Tans would also demand who smokers were. Helena along with her sister also fed and cared for the injured IRA men who were hiding from the Black and Tans in their house.

Helena was awarded with two Cumann na mBan medals in the 40's by the Irish Government for her bravery, courage shown and demonstrated during the war of independence. I am very proud of Helena and very proud that she is my Great Grandmother.



Cumann na mBan Medals that Helena O'Neill was presented with.



Hand painted picture of "Ardacrow House", Kilbrittain, Co Cork,