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Writing for Description: Excerpts from *Finding My Irish*

by Sharon Shea Bossard

Sharon Shea Bossard has written a book, *Finding My Irish*, which combines her search for her ancestors, particularly her grandmother Bridget Murphy, with the story of their emigration and life in America. Sharon Bossard's talent for descriptive passages involves her reader totally in the scene. Not only do we see what she sees, but we hear and sometimes smell the image presented.

In October 2003, Sharon and her husband Phil traveled to Ireland to visit the place where her grandmother was born. Her search for Bridget Murphy revealed two birth certificates for two babies born on the same day, with the same name, in the same general area. The first location they were trying to find was Ballinskelligs, in the southwest of the Iveragh peninsula of County Kerry. The Irish name, Baile na Sceilge, means "Town of the Steep Rock/Crag".

Storm clouds gathered overhead while the mist from the ocean spread light drops of dew on our windshield. The road narrowed and the chilling fog rolled in. We turned up the heat. Riding along the coastline to Ballinskelligs, we got not only spectacular glimpses of the coastline through the intermittent fog, but we could also hear the mighty Atlantic Ocean force its arrival onto the rocky Kerry shores. We caught views of rugged cliffs stacked with boulders, and we watched as the thickening fog engulfed us....

When we entered The Glen, the fog lifted. The views were so spec-

tacular that Phil pulled the car to the side of the road so we could take it all in. I rolled my window down, and the smell of clean, crisp sea air enveloped us. Spread before us were lush green valleys, foothills dotted with sheep, and cottages with smoke twirling from their chimneys – Ballinskelligs greeted us with all of its splendor.

Beautiful blue skies greeted them the morning Sharon and Phil drove to Valentia Island – a perfect day to search for grandmother Bridget's townland. At the heritage center on the Island she showed Bridget's birth certificate and asked the location of Ballyhearney townland, and if any Murphy families occupied the land. They learned there were hundreds of Murphy's on Valentia and there were two Ballyhearney townlands. Sharon pulled an old letter from her briefcase, dated 1949, from a cousin, Hannah Keating. The heritage center volunteer knew Hannah and told them she had recently passed away. He directed them to the Kylemore Graveyard up the road and wished them safe journey.

At the entrance to the graveyard, they met a woman tending a grave. She too had known Hannah and would take them to her cottage.

It was important to see Lawrence and Hannah Keating's cottage; we appreciated Patsy going with us, for we would never have found the place without her help. Abandoned, this 300-year-old cottage stood strong against the wind. Stones of various sizes, stacked with sand to cement them together, formed the walls.

