



This photograph shows Kathleen Snavely in 2000 when she donated \$1 million to Syracuse University in memory of her first husband, Roxie Rollins, the founder of Seneca Dairy. (Courtesy of Syracuse University)

# The longest-lived Irish person ever? She lives here

By Sean Kirst  
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Not quite six years ago, Donna and Bruce Moore picked up Donna's great-aunt, Kathleen Hayes Rollins Snavely, and took her out for dinner in Syracuse. As they were driving, Bruce recalls, Kathleen started talking about the condition of the economy. She told Bruce there were trends that bothered her. She worried, she said, about a national downturn.

That was in 2007. Kathleen saw what many trained economists didn't. Within months, America would careen into a great collapse.

Kathleen, when she predicted it, was 106-years-old. "She is just so delightful, and so sharp, and has such a great sense of humor," said Donna Moore, now of Connecticut, whose grandfather was the brother of Kathleen's first husband, Roxie.

For the past few years,

Kathleen has lived in Geddes at the Centers for St. Camillus, a health and rehabilitation center. Officials there say she declines all media attention.

Yet attention she's getting, for an astounding reason: Last Thursday's "Iris Central," a New York-based compendium of Irish news, reported that Kathleen — as of that morning — officially became "the longest-lived Irish-born person in history."

That's not simply the oldest Irish-born person living right now, which would be special enough.

That's the oldest documented Irish-born person.

Ever. "She's one in a million," said Sister Kathleen Osbelt, a good friend and the founder of Francis House, a North Side hospice in Syracuse. "She's feisty, she's worked very hard and she's enjoyed her life; she's always been one to keep her sense of humor."

But even "one in a million" literally understates her status.

Kathleen will turn 112 next month. That extraordinary longevity was noted in early January by the Dublin-based Irish Times, using information provided by the Gerontology Research Group. When the article was published, The Times noted that Kathleen was only days away from breaking the Irish record for long life held by Katherine Plunkett, who died in 1932 at 111 years and 327 days old.

Thursday, Kathleen took over first place.

If longevity equates to resilience, she is a fitting symbol of indomitable Irish-American grit. Megan Smolenyak, a noted genealogist, reviewed pertinent documents for Irish Central and confirmed key dates in the tale, which goes like this:

Kathleen was born in 1901 in Fecale, County Clare. Records show her father was a farmer and a pub owner, Smolenyak said. At 20, Kathleen left Ireland — a decision made

by many young Irish men and women in difficult economic times — to live with a maternal uncle on Marcellus Street in Syracuse.

For the journey, she listed herself as "a domestic." She'd later tell Osbelt she had \$2 and change in her pocket, when she got here.

From that point on, her story gets picked up by records at the Onondaga Historical Association: How she worked for a time as a waitress at the old Syracuse State School. How, by the mid-1920s, she had met and married Roxie, a young cook. How they settled on the city's South Side and opened the old Seneca Dairy, which became a booming business and a popular ice cream spot.

The couple never had children. When Roxie died, in 1968, they had a home on Bradford Parkway and a place at Henderson Harbor, according to documents at the OHA. Kathleen married again, to Jesse Snavely of Pennsylvania, but she settled into a quiet life in Syracuse after she was widowed for the second time.

"She was just an extremely friendly person, someone you loved spending time with," said a friend, Joan Casey, who always associates Kathleen with the Regency Towers on James Street — where Kathleen lived until well past her 100th birthday.

"Just unbelievable," said Karen White, owner of Julie's Place, a restaurant at the Regency. "She didn't use a hearing aid, she didn't wear glasses and she didn't use a cane." Not long ago, when White visited Kathleen at the Centers for St. Camillus, she brought her a "care package" from the Regency that included some spanakopita and a good Manhattan.

As for Kathleen's Irish heritage, White recalled — on one of Kathleen's birthdays — how another resident of the Regency, the late Harold LaTulip, recruited Syd Tenenbaum, an accomplished singer, to serenade Kathleen with a version of "Danny Boy."

"She started crying," White

said, "and the whole restaurant was applauding and congratulating her."

Donna Moore said her great-aunt remains proud of what she accomplished in business. In December 2000, her \$1 million gift provided a significant boost to the Syracuse University building drive that produced the new Whitman School of Management.

In an SU release written at the time, Kathleen recalled how she was earned \$5 a week, in the 1920s, when she started at the old E.W. Edwards Department Store. She and Roxie then founded the Seneca Dairy, which grew to include two locations and 40 employees.

"Neither of us had a formal business education," Kathleen said in the release. "We learned on the job, through experience. If you have a feeling for management and enjoy it, experience will give you the skills."

In that sense, her life is emblematic of the millions who sailed away from Ireland. Her homeland's national story is so intertwined with departure that Irish President Michael Higgins makes this gesture on the 100th birthday of all Irish-born men and women, at home or abroad: They receive a letter of congratulations and a check equivalent to about \$3,480.

Not one has lived as long as Kathleen Hayes Rollins Snavely, who arrived in Syracuse with little more than change in her pocket, settled in a neighborhood of the working poor and helped to build a thriving dairy business.

By any measure, it was a life of depth and meaning. But to be celebrated as the oldest Irishwoman, ever?

Her friends are sure, when she heard the news, she must have laughed.

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