

Travel Winner

Kearl's Quest for Welsh Ancestor Opens Rich Archival Trail in Europe

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Beckie Kearl won the Palisadian Post travel contest this year for her vivid description of a trip to Europe in 1989 that gave her the opportunity to get closer to her roots than she had ever anticipated. For her achievement, 37-year-old Kearl will receive a night for two at Barnabey's Hotel in Manhattan Beach.

Kearl and her husband, Alan, and daughters, Holly, 12, and Mary, 8, moved to the Palisades at the end of 1993 after moving around the Midwest due to Alan's job relocations. Alan currently works as a manager in a small cosmetics company in Irwindale.

After entering the contest for the first time, Kearl won the award for her account of her travels to Wales in search of her great-great grandfather, a search and discovery that resulted in an invitation to be the guest of honor for a celebration with Prince Charles. Unfortunately, she was unable to return for the celebration, but Kearl has since been contacted by archivists who are interested in her family history.

The history of Kearl's great-great grandfather, James Crane, has been passed from generation to generation. As a child, Crane moved to the Pembroke poorhouse, the first year it opened, after living in various foster homes. Interestingly, in the 150 years that the boarding house has existed, Crane was the only per-

son who kept a memoir of his stay there. Because of his accounts, the current caretakers of the building were able to clarify the date the building actually opened.

"Nobody ever took the time to write down their history," said Kearl. "Everybody knew that the poorhouse was a difficult place to live; it was strict but Crane managed. He made the best of it; he was such a cheerful person." Crane later found fortune in the United States after leaving his homeland without family or a penny to his name.

When Beckie decided to trace her roots, she looked first to the copy of Crane's history that her mother had given her. Yet the success the Kearls found once they arrived in England was a complete surprise. They realized that this one man's history was the key that unlocked the mysteries to not only her past, but others.

Kearl urges others who wish to learn more about the history of their ancestors through traveling to find out as much information as possible about their past before they depart on their trip. By knowing the death date of her great-great grandfather, Kearl was able to unravel much more of her past. In Crane's time, people were placed in the cemetery according to their death date; without it, she could not have found his grave.

In her two years living in the area, Kearl has volunteered at both Paul Revere Junior High School and Marquez Elementary where her children attend school.



Beckie Kearl

In 1989, my husband and I had the opportunity to go to Europe for three weeks. Seeing the Eiffel Tower, Buckingham Palace, Stone Henge, German castles along the Rhine, were all like a dream come true. But even more poignant and dear in my memory was the opportunity to visit a 150-year old stone poor house along the coast of Wales, some humble village homes in then, Communist East Germany, and the grave of a Canadian soldier in Normandy.

My husband and I decided to spend some of our time in Britain visiting the towns of our ancestors. Because I had a copy of the history of my great-great grandfather who was born in Wales, I chose to visit his home. Little did I realize what a stir this history would create. We found James' baptismal record in a stone church built in the year 1000 in the small seaside village of Penally. It read, "James Crane bastard child of Elizabeth Harris". Because of shame and poverty James had never lived with his mother although she lived in the same town and later married and had seven other children. James went from one foster family to another until the Pembroke poor house was opened and then he went there to live.

We went to Pembroke, near Penally, and after some searching were led to an old set of buildings which then served as an old folks home. We found the Matron and inquired if this had once been the Pembroke Poor House. She assured us it was and wondered how we knew. I showed her James Crane's history. She was very excited. Could she copy it she wondered? Could we stay and let her call the city Archivist? To shorten a long story. We had arrived during the preparations for a celebration of this building. It's fame was that it was the longest continuous used structure to provide social services in Britain.

Not only did James Cranes' history give a colorful, cheerful description of life in the poor house, but it also clarified the beginning date of operation of the poor house which had been in question. Parts of James' history were put in a commemorative brochure. I was invited to return for the celebration

later in that year to be the guest of honor with Prince Charles and received numerous letters thanking me for sharing the history. James tells in his history of later leaving Wales, penniless and without family, to seek his fortune in America. He became prosperous in family and wealth in America and left a wonderful legacy to me. I felt overwhelmed at all that had happened and also pleased to have my great-great grandfather finally acknowledged with proper dignity in his own country.

From Britain we went sightseeing across Europe until we reached East Germany. My father's parents had left all their family behind in a German settlement in Poland after WWI and migrated to Canada. For ten years I had been corresponding with a cousin named Helga who spoke and wrote English and lived in East Germany. She had arranged for us to meet my father's aunts and uncles who lived in several different small towns near the border, where they were forced to relocate after WWII. This was 1989, the year before the wall came down. The guard booths at the East/West border were very intimidating. But driving into East Germany we were not searched or checked. I brought in green grapes which my Aunt Frieda, Helga's mother said she had not seen since before the war, 45 years earlier. She loved them. It was amazing for me to think that I had bought them less than 30 miles away. Since neither my husband nor I spoke German we depended entirely on Helga to translate for us as we drove from village to village to meet our relatives. Helga, nor any of the relatives had phones, so through letters she had arranged a three day tour and visit for us. When we arrived at each home, there was a big feast prepared for us and all of the extended family in that area came from their homes to meet us. We were treated like royalty. So little could be said in words, but we said so much with our eyes.

The grocery stores carried no fresh, frozen or canned fruits or vegetables. Yet at every relative's we were given home canned vegetables or fruits from their own gardens. It was early summer and I knew we were being given the last that they had, saved for a special occasion. Cars were very old and very

expensive. Helga had been waiting on a list for 10 years to get a car. Everyone, including my Great Aunt, who hadn't left her house for over five years had to have a ride in our modern Western rental car. My Uncle Willie could speak a little English as he had been a prisoner of war in Scotland during WWII. He told me over and over, "Special girl, come to see us. Thanks, thanks." When we left the East to go to the West our car was searched from top to bottom. Under the seats, in the car cushions, in the trunk, under the car itself, anywhere a human could hide. But no one checked our purses or luggage. Even the guards knew there was nothing of monetary value to take out of East Germany, only people.

Now we headed back to Paris and then on to Normandy. I had one last stop. My uncle's grave. He died in the invasion of Normandy. If I had studied history better I would have known you can't just drive to Normandy and look for a grave yard and find your uncle's grave. After finding 50 or more graveyards, combing every grave in five or six Canadian graveyards and missing our ferry to Dover, an hour before the last boat left which would connect us with our plane in London we finally found Eric Weinheimer's grave in a beautifully kept graveyard. I knelt and cried. Tears of relief for finding it, since no one in my father's family had ever be able to visit the grave, and tears for a twenty two year old boy who left a girlfriend behind in England, and family in Canada. Eric's own father loved Hitler. He used to scream and cheer as he heard Hitler's mesmerizing speeches on the radio in their farmhouse in Canada. Eric had left home without his father's blessing and had fought against Uncle Willie and many other relatives. He had died with thousands of others in that historic invasion in the early summer of 1944. But the graveyard was beautiful, much nicer than most French people kept their own gardens. A sign at the entrance said it all, "The citizens of France care for this graveyard in deepest gratitude to those who fought so valiantly to give us liberty."

Going to Europe taught me a great deal about history, about beauty and most importantly gave me a greater appreciation for my own heritage.