

A MODERN-DAY PASSAGE WEST

By **Eugene L. Meyer**

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They came from Southern Maryland to central Kentucky, following the path of ancestors from two centuries ago. For Becky Wathen Proffitt and Doris Beavan Jones, their 14-hour van ride across the mountains was a reverse-roots trip from St. Mary's County, Md., to its tiny rural namesake here.

"You walk down the street," said Jones, 77, and "there's Spalding Realty. You walk into the courthouse, Mr. Jarboe shows you in to see a Judge Mattingly." The names in St. Mary, Ky., are right out of the St. Mary's, Md., phone book.

This weekend, Proffitt and Jones could see the historic churches, Catholic motherhouses and parochial schools that dot this hilly countryside. They could find connections across time and space in the graveyards and even in the name of a local funeral home: Just as in Leonardtown, Md., it's Mattingly.

The descendants of Maryland's 17th-century founders were here to meet descendants of the large-scale migration from Southern Maryland that followed the Revolutionary War. Many of Maryland's settlers picked up and moved on to what was then the frontier, but they took some of Maryland with them.

This fourth biennial National Reunion of Descendants of Maryland Catholics to Kentucky was no mere family reunion, although it evolved from one in the late 1980s. This was a families reunion. It was, even more than that, a regional reunion, linking St. Mary's, the Mother County of Maryland, with its trans-Alleghenies outposts.

More than 500 people assembled here in the St. Charles parish hall, sharing family trees, photocopying documents, discovering new relatives and greeting old ones.

Kentuckians who visit St. Mary's, Md., as many did in 1992, experience the same eerie feeling of familiarity. "The thing that just blew our minds, when we were there," said Martha Mattingly Thompson, 51, "it was like being in a cemetery here. This is the only area away from there that has as many Mattinglys." Maybe more.

In this part of Kentucky, they grow tobacco the Maryland way, hanging it out to dry slowly from the rafters of drafty barns, rather than rapidly with heat. And they stuff their hams with cabbage or kale, another custom otherwise peculiar to St. Mary's County, Md.

After the Revolution, farmland was becoming scarce for the large Catholic families of Southern Maryland, and 60 families, making up what they called the Maryland Land League, formed the vanguard of the movement westward.

They heard the stories of this Eden, of the richness of Kentucky, and it was the first area west of the mountains that opened up to mass migration. The Marylanders, for the most part, were small farmers, many of them in debt. They left behind land depleted from the growing of tobacco, which they would cultivate anew in Kentucky.

But for many, frontier life was more than they had bargained for. The vegetation was dense, the soil poor and the Indians threatening. According to lore, the newcomers would ritually kick each other in the pants for being so foolish as to leave the bountiful and serene Chesapeake shores.

In 1808, there were so many Catholics hereabouts that the Vatican created the diocese of Bardstown, encompassing the area from the mountains to the Mississippi River. (Bardstown is no longer the seat of a diocese, but it does claim to be the bourbon capital of the world.)

Kentucky Catholics, in ways not well known to outsiders, kept their cultural connections to Maryland -- right down to whether they stuff their hams with cabbage or kale, which depends on where people live, as it still does in St. Mary's.

And the connection has been two-way: The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, near here, sent generations of nuns to teach at St. Mary's Academy, a school for girls in Leonardtown that closed several years ago and now is being reborn as the St. Mary's campus of Charles County Community College.

But perhaps most striking are the names. Bardstown's mayor is a Spalding (a physician who goes by "Dr. Harry"). There also is a Spalding clothes store (since 1856) and a Spalding Hall, which houses a whiskey museum. And, of course, there are Mattinglys, lots and lots of them.

"You hit the magic word," said David Hall, a local historian. "The Mattinglys are just legion. They have done well in this part of Kentucky. You either know one, you're kin to one or somebody you know married one."

Or, as in the case of Martha and Gerald Thompson, you're both married to one. "She's got five lines {of Mattinglys}; I've got three," said Gerald, 56, a reunion organizer.

Then there's Theresa Hayden Roberts, 59, of Leonardtown, also a Spalding who married a Mattingly. She is here with Proffitt and Jones, but she has come more than full circle in her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, as this Catholic enclave is known.

First, her St. Mary's forebears came here. Then, one went on to Illinois after the Civil War. From there, her mother moved to Washington to attend St. Elizabeths nurses school. She married a classmate, who happened to be a Hayden from St. Mary's. They lived in the District, where Theresa was raised and schooled. Theresa married a Washingtonian whose mother was a Mattingly.

But if Mattinglys in St. Mary's are increasingly obscured by a tide of newcomers, they still predominate here. When Marion County's high school homerooms were organized alphabetically a few years back, there was a class-and-a-half full of Mattinglys in each grade, Gerald Thompson said.

"Never throw a rock or you'll hit a Mattingly or a mule," the saying goes, according to Karen Fowler Caldwell, 36, who admits to having "just one in my line. My husband has five."

The lines were very much in evidence on the name tags of descendants whose cars, vans and motor homes filled the parish parking lot well before noon Friday. "Hi, good to see you," Gerald Thompson

greeted Theresa Hayden Roberts, who also is an Abell. "You're kin to my wife, I'm sure, because she's got the Abells."

The Holley sisters, Betty Mason and Cecilia, of Leonardtown, also are Abells somewhere down the line. Cecilia, 63, was working with Becky Proffitt at a table laden with books and pamphlets from the Mother County. It was by far the busiest among those offering genealogical books and related items. Before noon, they had all but sold out their supply of "Marriages and Deaths, St. Mary's County, 1634-1990" and "History of St. Mary's County, Md., 1634-1990."

"I think we're the most popular corner," said Becky Proffitt, 69. "We never dreamed it would go like this." But the reason was not hard to fathom.

"We're proud of our roots; it's the story of the Catholic Church going West," said Brother Leo D. Willett, of St. Louis and Fancy Farm, Ky. "Today, if somebody asks me my roots -- like Italian or Irish -- I say colonial Maryland." CAPTION: Doris Beavan Jones, of St. Mary's County, Md., greets Brother Leo D. Willett, of Fancy Farm, Ky. CAPTION: Jane Thomas, center, of Danville, Ky., and Judy Fischer, right, of Collierville, Tenn., study a pedigree chart compiled by Jessie Hagan, of Louisville.