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Faith Today



One of those Byron women

By Father David K. O'Rourke OP
NC News Service

I am thinking back a hundred years to a woman I never knew. But she is an indispensable link in my own human history.

We all come from somewhere, every one of us — not just personally, but religiously as well. Our faith has roots that reach back into the human family. For the church is a communion that not only stretches out into the world around but back in time as well.

We call this communion the "communion of saints." And we're talking about sanctity written in the flesh and realities of human life, not sculpted in plaster.

As I glance backward in time, I see a woman who is for me a symbol of determination.

On rare occasions I heard her discussed when I was young: on screened-in porches by women with long sleeves and lace cuffs, and by men with white shoes, rounded collars and suspenders.

To my mother she was "Mama," never anything else.

To my father, who spoke of her with awe in his voice, she

was always "Mrs. Woods."

And to the others in the family, when they thought that the small fry were in bed, she was "one of those Byron women."

She was strong to the point of being tough, ambitious and aggressive for herself and her family, and successful in her ambitions. Her father was a saddlemaker. Her brother was in Custer's army. And I am left with the impression that she could have faced broncos and the wild West with a cool head.

She saved and managed and accomplished one of her goals — a handsome new house with porches and gables. For her, the center of the house was the large kitchen where she and her sisters gathered to cook, to can foods, to bake and to plan.

The kitchen's principal ornament was a large wooden clock. I don't know what it was like. But I do know that for grandmother the clock represented a departure from a pattern, a luxury in a world in which extra money was better put into land and investments.

Her wedding had been quite an event. But ever since then life had been careful and planned.

The town where the family liv-

more than it often does today on the Body of Christ reserved in the tabernacle and exposed for public adoration on special occasions.

The search for a tabernacle ended where it had begun, in her kitchen. For grandmother sacrificed her principal luxury, her kitchen clock.

She removed the works inside, renewed the exterior and lined it with material from her wedding dress. That symbol of grace and luxury was cut and snipped to fit the shape of the clock and the material was fixed into place.

What are saints like? Grandmother was determined not sweet, aggressive not gentle, ambitious not humble, and successful in the ways of the world. If anyone had ever suggested that she was saintly, both she and all who knew her would have thought the person daft.

But somewhere in that complex of strength and ambition was a very real faith. And she was determined to hand it down to her children. She had the missionary's determination that the faith she had received would continue into the generations to come.

As I follow the roots of my faith back a hundred years, this is a woman I meet. She was quite determined, a person who might not have fit some images of what a saint is like. But it seems that the God who gave grandmother her determination and made it effective in her life is capable of writing s-a-n-c-t-i-t-y in quite amazing ways.

(Father O'Rourke is on the staff of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)

A wooden clock and a wedding dress were prominent features in the life of a saint who, although he never knew her, was very close to Father David O'Rourke. This woman, he writes, was tough, determined and ambitious. But buried within that strength was a very real faith.