

Marty Maher

Of all the legends of West Point, there is one man that stands out in so many ways—a father figure to the cadets, a confidante to future generals and a quirky character who never hesitated to bend the rules for a friend—Martin “Marty” Maher.

Marty was born in Rosecrea, County Tipperary in 1876. He grew up with five brothers “wild and free” on a small farm, tending to animals and crops, cutting the turf and walking three miles barefooted to a one-room schoolhouse to learn the 3 Rs.

In his memoir *Bringing Up the Brass: My 55 Years at West Point*, Maher described the saddest day of his boyhood: “That was when my mother, only 49 years old, died suddenly.” He was only twelve. Marty’s mother had actually borne six children prior to Marty, but all six had come down with diphtheria and died within eighteen days of each other. This tragic loss in the Maher family was followed by a second family of five boys. The loss of the mother of these boys left Marty’s father, age 68, to raise five children, the youngest being only three years old. Mr. Maher, “Martin the Herd,” managed to raise his sons, run the farm, and even bake his own bread. Over a period of years, he later sent all five of the boys to America and paid their way, \$15 in steerage back then, because, as he said, “An Irishman has to leave Ireland so he can make himself heard.”



Marty came to America at the age of twenty. In fact, Marty was running from the law, or more precisely, from a court date for assaulting his boss by choking him with his own tie over a “small misunderstanding,” as Marty always insisted. In his memoir he described his hasty departure: “In Ireland, they have three different kinds of wakes: One for the dead, one for Catholics who turned Protestant, and one for people who are leaving for the U.S.A. My going-to-America wake was a lulu. All the neighbors came and brought cake and food and we had whiskey and beer and dancing to the accordion.”

He arrived at Ellis Island and after ditching his court papers in the ocean, he finally set foot in New York with only \$5 in his pocket. He found his way to the Weehawken Railroad Station and three hours later, at midnight, he

arrived at West Point and located his brother Joe, who was working as a mechanic at West Point. They celebrated their reunion with a party.

The next day Marty was hired as a waiter in the mess hall where 400 cadets were fed at a time. For Marty, the whole experience was akin to landing on the moon. As he wrote, "I didn't even know the names of the damned vegetables they were eating. In Ireland, we mostly had turnips and potatoes." He stayed with the job for almost two years. During that time, he became friends with many of the cadets, often sympathizing and commiserating with them over their problems. But the long, hard hours and the deductions for "breakage" finally convinced Marty to enlist in the Army, provided he could stay at West Point. Permission was granted.

As a private, Marty did all kinds of handyman work from carpentry to blacksmithing while getting to know everyone at the Academy, officers, cadets and civilians alike. At this time he wrote to his father asking him to send over his other three brothers. Come they did to America with a big surprise for Marty: His father Martin joined his immigrant sons at the age of eighty-five (he lived to be 93).



Marty often did off duty jobs at the officers' homes for extra cash and that is how he met Mary O'Donnell, an Irish lass from Donegal, one of the many Irish serving girls in America. They married, Marty age 34 and Mary age 25. Their long and happy life had one sadness, no children, but their informally adopted niece Margaret brought the joy of children into their home.

A turning point in Marty's life came when he became acquainted with Colonel Herman Koehler, head of the Physical Education Department, or as known then, Master of the Sword. That title harkens back to the time when fencing was the first official sport at West Point. Its first coach was a Frenchman who arrived at West Point in 1814. Marty like all of the cadets was afraid of "Muscle Man Koehler" up at the gym. He was advised to stay away from him: "He'd make a grizzly bear look charming." But Marty one day timidly asked Koehler a simple question, and to Marty's delight they hit it off right away. The colonel arranged for Marty to work at the gym full time, the start of a fifty year career in athletics.

One memorable day Colonel Koehler decided he would make a swimming instructor out of Marty. One problem: Marty not only could not swim but he also was deathly afraid of the water. The colonel was undeterred. He had Marty put on a belt and tied one end of the rope to the belt and the other to a railing. Colonel Koehler explained step by step how to do the breast stroke and declared that Marty was ready for the water. The next three days of breast stroke drills, no matter how hard Marty tried, were fruitless. The colonel finally had to admit that Marty was never going to be a swimmer. However, the colonel noted how well Marty was able to repeat instructions back to him, so Koehler decided to try Marty out anyway as a swimming instructor. To Marty's great amazement, he managed to teach total landlubber cadets how to swim—without getting wet himself!

Marty continued to teach swimming to cadets at West Point for the next thirty-five years, his lack of swimming ability a secret between him and Colonel Koehler. Some of his better known students include Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, Douglas MacArthur and Omar Bradley. Only one time was Marty's secret almost found out. When the colonel was out of town, the lieutenant in charge had gotten a tip that Marty was a fake and could not swim. The officer ordered Marty to get into the pool and prove himself. Shaking and terrified on the pool ladder, Marty salvaged the situation by teaching himself what he taught his students. He swam across the deep end and then the length of the pool. The lieutenant turned to the informer and said, "Hell, he can swim better than you can."

In the 1920s, the superintendent Douglas MacArthur introduced intramurals for non-varsity cadets. His goal was, "Every cadet an athlete." The cadets called the program "Intramurder" because of the rigorous standards demanded by General MacArthur. Marty was involved in all aspects of the program: assisting the instructors, giving rubdowns to the cadets, and gaining knowledge of each sport.

Football was the sport Marty loved the most. He never missed an Army-Navy game and became renowned for his knowledge of and dedication to the game. Always gregarious, Marty befriended many of the players and coaches on the opposing teams. His friendship with Knute Rockne led to a long series of Army-Notre Dame football games that continued until 1947. The series started in 1919 when Yale vacated its date on Army's schedule, opening a date that Marty was able to fill through his friendship with Rockne. Notre Dame was then unknown in football and Rockne was so new to the game of football that Marty had to show him how to lace up a football properly. But Army quickly learned that these "farmers from Indiana" brought a toughness to the field that would make Notre Dame football universally admired.

Marty retired from the service in 1928 with the rank of Technical Sergeant (E-7), but he continued in a civil service position in the gym until his final retirement in 1946. Throughout his career he was honored many times by the Academy. He was named an honorary member of the classes of 1912, 1926, and 1928, and a large oil portrait of Marty was hung in the gym. The crowning glory for Marty was a full West Point review, a rare honor, given upon Marty's retirement. As Marty stood with his wife Mary and many well-wishers, the Corps of Cadets marched before him in full-dress uniform playing all of the old Irish airs he knew so well. Sadly, Mary died in 1948, only 63.

Marty's memoir was completed in 1951. It was written with simplicity and wit, but his impressions and memories were so vivid that John Ford made the book into the delightful movie "The Long Grey Line" in 1955. It starred Tyrone Power and Maureen O'Hara. Despite many liberties taken with the facts, this warm, nostalgic film did portray Marty's charm and charisma quite accurately.

Marty died in 1961 at the age of 84. He was buried with Mary in the West Point cemetery close to one of America's best known generals, George Armstrong Custer.

Dwight Eisenhower wrote the forward for Marty's memoir *Bringing Up the Brass*. In it President Eisenhower praised Marty's "unswerving, sometimes fanatical devotion" to West Point. He truly captured Marty Maher's essence with these words: "... I cannot put too high an estimate on the help he gave my morale. Marty, with his Irish wit and his talent for understanding, did the same for many others."

(Written by Anne Fitzgerald)

© Irish Cultural Society of the Garden City Area

