

Nellie Cashman

EARLY YEARS

Ellen Cashman, or Nellie as she would come to be known, is thought to have been born in County Cork, Ireland in either 1844 or 1845. Nellie and her younger sister Fanny were born into one of the most trying times in Irish history: An Gorta Mór or the Great Hunger (1845 – 1852).

As a small child, Nellie experienced the failing of the potato crop due to blight, a type of fungus. For the landless and landed laborer majority of the Irish population, approximately 56% by 1820, potatoes were the staple crop that made up the majority of their diets. Without support outside of Ireland for food, Nellie would have watched more than 1 million people die of starvation and related disease, and at least another 1 million leave the island in desperation. Tenant farmer families like Nellie's struggled after systematic land loss under oppressive political conditions. Such tragic experiences stuck with many children Nellie's age for the rest of their lives.



Irish peasants starving during the Potato Famine (1845- 1849), 1846.
Everett Collection



Deck of the immigrant ship 'Artesisia' in a harbor, 1855.
Everett Collection

The exact date of Nellie, her widowed mother Frances, and sister's emigration to the United States is not known for sure. It is believed they left Ireland in the 1850s, eventually settling in Boston, Massachusetts. During this period of high emigration, Boston became a central hub for newly arrived Irish immigrants in the United States.

The American Civil War (1860 – 1865), like most wars, would have afforded a greater opportunity for work for women. As a young woman in Boston, Nellie operated a lift and told tales of running into Ulysses S. Grant himself. Unlike many of their fellow Irish immigrants, the Cashman women only stayed in Boston temporarily. At the conclusion of the war the 3 women set off west again, this time to San Francisco, California.

After settling in San Francisco, Nellie's sister Fanny married an Irish businessman named Thomas Cunningham. Thomas employed Nellie for a short time and would eventually become a good connection for her own business pursuits. Unlike her sister, Nellie did not stay for long in California. In 1872, at around 28 years old, she headed to Nevada where the American legend of the Woman Prospector and Miner Caretaker named Nellie Cashman would begin.

