

IRISH TRAVELLER

"We're like any other community, and in any other neighborhood there's good and bad," Sherlock says, her arched eyebrows raised high as if she's speaking a gospel truth. She's talking to a reporter only because a trusted friend has come along. No way will she pose for a picture. In the fast, clipped Deep South brogue that distinguishes her speech, she continues: "We're a close-knit society. We don't like to speak out. . . . We stay to ourselves."

The folks of Murphy Village rue the day they heard of Madelyne Gorman Toogood. She is the 25-year-old Traveler who became infamous last month when she slammed her daughter, 4-year-old Martha, into the back seat of their SUV in a shopping center near South Bend, Ind., and proceeded to hit her over and over. A surveillance camera caught it all, and the footage was broadcast nationwide for days and days last month, even after Toogood turned herself in to police.

"They basically would go door to door seeking home improvement work, saying, 'Hey, I was working down the street and noticed your chimney needs some work and I'd be willing to do it for this wonderful price,' " says Tom Bartholomy, president of the Better Business Bureau in Charlotte and former president of the BBB of Northeastern Indiana. Unsuspecting homeowners, charmed by the Travelers' seeming earnestness, would agree and let them up on the roof. "Then they'd come down and say, 'Hey, this is going to take more than I thought. I need some more supplies. We're going to need a deposit.' And then they're gone.

Folks at Murphy Village don't like being associated with what Toogood did. Physical child abuse, say law enforcement sources, rarely if ever is discovered among the Travelers.

People here bristle at the possibility that the outside world will think that Toogood is one of them. She may be a Traveler, but the Murphy Villagers do not claim her. She's from Texas, from a different group.

The Irish Travelers who settled in the United States in the 19th century migrated to different parts of the country and established their own clan groups, often with little intermingling across regions.

IRISH TRAVELLER

Toogood hails from an Irish Traveler community in White Settlement, near Fort Worth. Experts say it is smaller than Murphy Village. Those Texas Travelers are known as the Greenhorns.

Another Irish Traveler group is settled outside Memphis and is known as the Mississippi Travelers, after the river. There also are scattered and smaller settlements of Irish Travelers -- say, six or eight families -- in northeastern states such as New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware, especially in trailer parks.

There are several thousand Travelers in the United States, including some of English and Scottish descent. Their precise numbers are unknown.

Wherever they are, these Travelers share a distinctly suspicious view of the world, one shaped by their people's history of persecution in Ireland, where they were seen as an itinerant underclass. The Irish Travelers came to the United States in the 1840s to flee the potato famine in Ireland. Here in the United States, they often are taunted as "gypsies" because of their nomadic lifestyle.

The Travelers view themselves at odds with outsiders. They even have a word for non-Travelers. "Country people," they call them. Traditionally, the Travelers haven't even trusted the country people's schools.

"This is a community that, like the Amish, treasures its remoteness," said Larry Otway, a New York-based activist for the Travelers and other small marginalized ethnic groups. Otway calls them "very much an expression of American culture."

Each spring, in caravans of trucks and trailers that have replaced the ornate covered wagons of yore, the men pull out of Murphy Village. They fan out across the country to ply their trade, as do men from the clans in Texas and Tennessee. They are skilled driveway pavers, barn painters and roofers, often with regular seasonal customers.

But police in several states know some of these Travelers as something other than honest, hardworking folk. Some of them have a reputation, backed by arrests and convictions, for being relentless con artists. Like grifters, they move around the country running home improvement swindles. And the women sometimes run shoplifting scams, police say.

IRISH TRAVELLER

Joe Livingston, an investigator with the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division who is an expert on Traveler scams, estimates that perhaps 10 to 15 percent of the Murphy Village Travelers are thieves, or "yonks," as the Travelers label the wayward among them.

However small the proportion, their impact is felt widely along the seasonal circuits they travel. Livingston calls it "nontraditional organized crime." And tracking the phenomenon is a nightmare, he says, because of the web of same-names and nicknames among the Travelers.

Livingston can quote case after case of Traveler scams. The first he encountered was in 1984, up in Rhea County, Tenn. Some workmen completed a small construction job for an elderly man, who went inside the house to get money to pay them. They saw where he kept the cash, Livingston said, and returned later and stole it.

Some of the scams are inventive. Several Travelers were arrested a few years ago over a scam in which a Traveler wore a white lab coat and a stethoscope and went door to door in rural South Carolina, telling old folks he was there to examine them for an increase in their Social Security benefits. During the "exam," other Travelers searched the house for cash.

"They basically would go door to door seeking home improvement work, saying, 'Hey, I was working down the street and noticed your chimney needs some work and I'd be willing to do it for this wonderful price,' " says Tom Bartholomy, president of the Better Business Bureau in Charlotte and former president of the BBB of Northeastern Indiana. Unsuspecting homeowners, charmed by the Travelers' seeming earnestness, would agree and let them up on the roof. "Then they'd come down and say, 'Hey, this is going to take more than I thought. I need some more supplies. We're going to need a deposit.' And then they're gone.

Officials in St. Joseph County, Ind., say Madelyne Toogood and her husband, Johnny, appear to fit the pattern of "yonk" Travelers. Johnny Toogood has a long record of arrests under several names in several states, said Randy De Cleene, spokesman for the county prosecutor's office. He is wanted in Montana on a felony warrant for a home improvement scam. And Madelyne Toogood had a previous arrest for shoplifting at a Kohl's department store in Texas, he said.

IRISH TRAVELLER

"I've been with the Better Business Bureau 20 years, and it's happened every year, like clockwork, like the swallows of Capistrano," he said. "When I was in Fort Wayne, they would usually come in RVs and stay at a campground, trailer-park-type area. The men would go around in pickup trucks to the neighborhoods, and the women would go to stores and steal merchandise. They go steal it, and then take it back for cash refunds." Investigator Livingston says, "There's always been speculation that women do things, but we haven't uncovered a big-time network yet."

Asked about the prevalence of theft among them, Rosen, the Toogood's lawyer, said: "I don't know the statistics, but I know the reputation. Part of it's true. But on the whole? I would say no. On the whole there's a lot of good, hardworking people who belong to this Irish culture of traveling from community to community and doing good work."

Back in South Carolina, even the police chief of North Augusta has kind words for the Travelers' work ethic. A Traveler crew painted Chief Lee Wetherington's roof and paved his driveway. Sure, he says, there are scam artists. But the scoundrels among the Travelers are about the same proportion as in society at large.

"They did good work," Wetherington said of the Travelers he hired. "I would trust Mikey Boy Sherlock with anything I owned."

Along Highway 25, the evolution of the Irish Travelers is obvious. Where trailer homes once stood, today there are sprawling ranch houses and two- or three-story houses as large as any suburban McMansion. You can still see the old trailers parked out back, or deeper into the woods, with aluminum foil over the windows for insulation. But the wealth of some Travelers is what catches the eye. These nomadic people who once scraped out a meager living now are driving Benzes and Lincolns and Caddies, all brand-new, and parking them in front of homes with beautiful brick masonry and ironwork.

Their tightknit, insular clans spend the winters in such sunny locales as White Settlement, Texas, and Murphy Village, S.C., then hit the road come spring. Many U.S.-based Irish Travelers, including Toogood's husband, work as itinerant roofers, pavers, and painters.

IRISH TRAVELLER

Irish Travelers have a bad reputation for ripping people off. Do they deserve it? "Some do and some don't," says Madelyne.

But it isn't just criminal complaints against travelers that have drawn attention to the Travelers. It is also how travelers live their lives.

And then there is Madelyne's husband Johnny Toogood. As a teenager he scammed an elderly Ohio woman in a home improvement fraud. "Well you know, I was young once," says Johnny. "Everybody you know has had a rough past, you know."

'Dateline' has found nine civil or criminal complaints including two convictions for theft against Johnny Toogood over a decade from Ohio to Pennsylvania and all the way to Montana. Authorities s run across Johnny Toogood using at least six different names including John Lark - a name he used when he met 91-year-old Helen Fisher six years ago.

Helen has since passed away, but her niece says she'll never forget what happened when Lark/Toogood charmed his way into her Aunt's home. "They followed her up to the door, and they suggested to her that she needed home repairs," says Fisher's niece, Toogood and his team hit her four different times over several years taking her for nearly \$7,000.

Behind the high fences of these trailer parks, Madelyne Toogood's clan sticks to itself. and isolation is part of the Traveler way of life.

Irish Travelers arrived in the United States in the 19th century. They traveled the country trading mules and horses - sometimes honestly, sometimes not very honestly.

Irish Travelers, also known as "White Gypsies," are members of a nomadic ethnic group of uncertain origin. Scholars often speculate that they are descended from a race of pre-Celtic minstrels and that their ranks were swelled by displaced farmers during Oliver Cromwell's bloody campaigns of the mid-1600s.

Travelers once roamed from town to town in horse-drawn carts, earning their keep by busking and tinsmithing; because of the latter vocation, they were nicknamed "Tinkers," a word that's now considered something of a slur.

A few Irish Travelers emigrated to America during the Potato Famine of the mid-19th century. Their 7,000-10,000 descendants still speak the secret Traveler language, a dialect alternately known as Shelta, Gammon, or Cant, which includes elements of Irish Gaelic, English, Greek, and Hebrew. They are also devout Roman Catholics who rarely marry outside the group.

IRISH TRAVELLER

Police frequently warn the elderly about home-improvement scams operated by a few Irish Travelers. Wandering contractors have been known to charge gullible customers thousands for "sealants" that are nothing more than watered-down lubricant; the con artists quickly leave town once the check is cashed.

They made their homes in tent camps. Some went Northeast - the Northerners. Some went south toward Memphis - The Mississippi Travelers. Some went to Murphy Village, South Carolina - the boys. Madelyne Toogood's ancestors worked their way out west.

Travelers do what that name implies - roam the country living out of trailers and hotels. Those who are con artists have moved from trading in broken down horses to home repair scams.

Traveler children grow up fast - some using fake licenses to drive when they're 12, 13 and 14. And almost all drop out of school after the sixth or eighth grade.

Wanda Mary, really a Northern Traveler who spent time in Murphy Village, admits to having had 28 aliases, running repair scams, shoplifting. She boasts of almost pulling off the most ambitious sc Traveler history.

"They could be playing in a sandbox one day, and snatched up and took and got married the next and be ten years old and have a baby by the time they are 11," says Hart. Patsy Hart says her husband was 17 when he married his first wife - who was only 11.

What did he say when Hart asked him how he could marry a child? "He just said that's the way it is," she says. "You can't do anything about it."

Last Monday, after hearing evidence that Rickey Allen Daugherty, a member of an Irish Traveller group, had duped an 80-year-old woman out of \$12,000 for a con repair job to the guttering on her house, a jury sentenced him to life imprisonment. Under Texas law, Daugherty, 58, will die in prison.

Even by Texas standards, which has the most severe sentencing record and highest death penalty rulings of any US state, Daugherty's sentence was harsh. It reflects the anger at the systematic scamming of lonely, elderly people by cruel professional con artists like Daugherty.

IRISH TRAVELLER

It took the Harris County jury just 18 minutes to send Daugherty away to prison for the rest of his natural life after hearing he had conned two elderly women, convincing both that they needed urgent repairs to their houses.

Across the US, however, there are repeated cases of settled people - known by Travellers as 'country folk' - being 'bilked'.

Toogood was described as a member of a group which travels around the American south and mid-west carrying out 'quick-hit fraud', just like Daugherty. Her husband, Johnny, had convictions in a number of states for fraud and had used various aliases.

The stories of crimes and misdeeds has tarnished the reputation of Travellers in the US. However, others argue that many are competent hard-working trades people with regular, satisfied customers.

In 1999, a father and two sons were jailed for six months for using false identifications to buy three new pickup trucks in South Carolina. In 1996, a judge in Kentucky jailed a 47-year-old Irish Traveller for 10 years for robbing and beating an elderly deaf-mute woman.

In 2000, three Travellers were charged in Louisville, Kentucky with swindling a mentally disabled 69-year-old man out of more than \$5,000. One of those charged, Brenda J Mensik, 42, had previously been charged with conning more than \$3,000 from an 80-year-old blind man.

In August 2001, police in Franklin, Tennessee said a man accused of forging a \$4,200 cheque belonging to an 89-year-old woman had told them he was a member of the Irish Travellers.

IRISH TRAVELLER

According to officials in the US, the Traveller community still fails to educate its children and continues to marry them off at an early age to first or second cousins.

A police chief said he had found Travellers carrying multiple identities and using magnetic licence plates on their pick-ups to avoid detection. "These people are pretty smart. They come into the state with Wisconsin plates so they don't look like transients," Captain Manny Bolz said. "Most of them change their names like the rest of us change our underwear."

While a state and federal investigation into the insurance fraud continues, the Star-Telegram has learned that the Gormans are Irish Travellers, a secretive and nomadic ethnic group whose members often garner their wealth by doing dubious repair work and executing scams — and by taking out exorbitant life insurance policies on one another.

Though Travellers have earned a reputation for home improvement scams, experts say insurance fraud is increasingly becoming the clan's bread and butter.