

Name _____

Date _____

Irish Lace

Irish lace is world-famous for its intricate designs, which are created from very simple patterns. Although lace-making today is a big business—large factories now roll off yards of the fabric in just minutes—the manufacture of Irish lace had relatively humble origins. In the beginning, its production was nothing more than a cottage industry.

In the 1800s Ireland was a land divided between the rich and the poor. Many families in Ireland lived in small cottages on little plots of land called crofts. Wealthy Irish lords owned this land, and the families who lived there (called tenant farmers) produced crops for them. The family usually grew its own food on the land not used for producing crops for the land owner. Most of the tenant farmers were very poor with little money for necessities.



Struggling with a lack of land and rocky soil, tenant farmers eventually found a reliable crop to grow: potatoes. Potatoes became the primary staple found on the crofts. But when the potato blight swept across the country between 1845 and 1851, massive crops were destroyed and thousands starved.

During this difficult time, relief for some Irish families came from an unexpected place. Many of the Catholic nuns in Ireland were familiar with how to make Venetian lace. Since Irish women had been producing rough cloth for their families for generations, the nuns realized their lace-making skills presented an opportunity to help save people from the famine. They created schools to teach many girls and women how to produce the fine crochet that has come to be known as "Irish lace." The wealthier Irish families that could afford to buy the lace earned the nickname "lace curtain Irish."

The designs of the lace were made up of detailed patterns that were developed by individual families. To preserve the originality of each family's designs, the patterns were closely guarded secrets passed from mother to daughter. The details of the patterns were kept so secret, in fact, that many of them were lost as the families either died or fled the poverty for other lands.

Eventually, the crochet schools established by the nuns in the 1850s and 1860s disappeared as fashions changed and the demand for Irish lace declined. The introduction of factory production also changed the industry; mass production of lace is now the norm.

In the 1880s, however, there was a brief revival of the cottage lace industry, and this time period produced most of the samples that are now family heirlooms or museum pieces.