



## THE HISTORY OF THE ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE

As we all know, Saint Patrick's Day is celebrated on March 17th, his religious feast day and the anniversary of his death in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The Irish have observed this day as a religious holiday for thousands of years. On St. Patrick's Day, which falls during the Christian season of Lent, Irish families would traditionally attend church in the morning and celebrate in the afternoon. Lenten prohibitions against the consumption of meat were waived and people would dance, drink and feast on the traditional meal of Irish bacon and cabbage.

Up until the 1970's, Irish laws mandated that pubs be closed on March 17th. Beginning in 1995, however, the Irish government began a national campaign to use St. Patrick's Day as an opportunity to attract tourism and showcase Ireland to the rest of the world. Last year, close to one million people took part in Ireland 's St. Patrick's Festival in Dublin, a multi-day celebration featuring parades, concerts, outdoor theater productions and fireworks shows.

## ST. PATRICK'S DAY IN AMERICA

There are conflicting versions of the first North American celebration. One source says it was held in Boston in 1737 by the Irish Charitable Society and later in Philadelphia and New York by the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Another source states that on March 17, 1762, a group of Irish-born soldiers serving in the English military marched through the streets of New York City en route to the local tavern to honor their patron saint and reconnect with their Irish roots, complete with marching bands and colorful banners. Bystanders joined in by singing Irish ballads and dancing down the cobblestone. The event was so popular it has been repeated annually since then. Irish patriotism among American immigrants flourished, prompting the rise of "Irish Aid" societies such as the Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick and the Hibernian Society.

Up until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, most Irish immigrants in America were members of the Protestant middle class. When the Great Potato Famine hit Ireland in 1845, close to a million poor, uneducated, Catholic Irish began to pour into America to escape starvation. Despised for their religious beliefs and funny accents by the American Protestants, the immigrants had trouble finding even menial jobs. When Irish Americans took to the streets on St. Patrick's Day to celebrate their heritage, newspapers portrayed them in cartoons as drunk, violent monkeys.

However, the Irish soon began to realize that their great numbers endowed them with a political power that had yet to be exploited. They started to organize, and their voting block, known as the "green machine," became an important swing vote for political hopefuls. Suddenly, annual St. Patrick's Day parades became a show of strength for Irish Americans, as well as a must-attend event for a slew of political candidates. In 1948, President Truman attended New York City 's St. Patrick's Day parade, a proud moment for the many Irish whose ancestors had to fight stereotypes and racial prejudice to find acceptance in America.

The New York City St. Patrick's Day parade is the oldest and largest civilian parade in the United States. Each year, nearly 3 million people line the one and a half mile parade route to watch the procession which takes more than five hours. Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and Savannah also celebrate the day with parades with between 10,000 and 20,000 participants.

Today, St. Patrick's Day is celebrated by people of all backgrounds in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Although North America is home to the largest parades, St. Patrick's Day has been celebrated in other locations far from Ireland, including Japan, Singapore, and Russia.



Submitted by: Anne Foody  
Irish Historian, Division #87  
March 2, 2004