



A History of St. Patrick's Day in St. Louis

*by Tim O'Neil, of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Mar 16, 2017*

On March 17, 1820, a small band of Irish settlers gathered to praise St. Patrick. Everyone raised a glass for a toast:

"May the present day form a part of the last year of Irish thralldom."

Thralldom is an old word for enslavement, used to curse British domination of the home island. Fourteen more formal toasts were made, the Missouri Gazette reported, followed by additional "volunteer" expressions.

Toasting was by the Erin Benevolent Society, which usually met in the home of its president, Jeremiah Connor, at Second and Pine streets. It was the first recorded observance of St. Patrick's Day here, although sparse accounts disagree whether a parade was included. The Irish then were a small part of the city's 4,400 souls. Marching came later.

Meanwhile, they'd assemble as excuses arose. On the saint's day in 1827, they met on the landing to toast the arriving steamboat Shamrock. Two decades later, migration of 8,000 refugees from Ireland's potato blight gave St. Louis a significant Gaelic lilt. By 1878, a Post-Dispatch story on St. Patrick's Day plans said the annual parade would follow "custom."

For much of the 20th century, the day's central event was solemn high Mass at St. Patrick's Church, 1201 North Sixth Street, on downtown's edge. For 38 years, the heart of the parish was the Rev. Timothy Dempsey, a strenuous shepherd to his flock. Father Dempsey founded soup

kitchens and lodging for the poor, mediated labor strikes and gang feuds and established charities (a residence for troubled men at 3427 Washington Avenue still bears his name). During the Depression, the big Mass was followed by meals for the poor. He died in 1936.

Back then, the Irish had their St. Pat's fun inside hotel ballrooms and dance halls. The Corned Beef and Cabbage Club, founded in 1920, held dinners big enough to draw major politicians. The Irish-American Club danced at the Emerald Hall, Taylor and Easton (Dr. Martin Luther King Boulevard) avenues. The Ancient Order of Hibernians mobbed their hall at 3619 Finney Avenue.

After World War II, the suburb of St. Ann hosted St. Pat's parades. But it was Joseph B. McGlynn Jr. who took marching into the big time.

In 1970, McGlynn and friends established a parade downtown. Their coup was luring Irish Prime Minister Jack Lynch as grand marshal of the second year's strut. Lynch called the parade "very impressive." It has ever been so.

In 1984, local Hibernians had a tiff with the downtown parade board and began their own, now held annually in Dogtown. With the schism nearly forgotten, both events are huge draws.