

## ST. PATRICKS DAY - NATIONAL

### A GREAT DAY FOR THE IRISH

by Mike McCormack

Welcome to the month of Saint Patrick, a time of joyous celebration among the Irish around the world. And why do we celebrate? Because we're Irish. It's been said that the Irish passion for their heritage gets stronger, the further they are from the Emerald Isle, and that may partially explain the popularity of this day, for whether or not they were poor in material possessions, the Irish always managed to carry with them, their unique culture, traditions, and religion. And Saint Patrick is part of all three. As a result of the Diaspora of the Irish throughout the world, no one in the entire litany of saints is better known, more loved, or greater celebrated than our patron.

It should be no surprise then, that the tradition of parading in St Patrick's honor started thousands of miles from the Emerald Isle, among Irish soldiers serving in the British army right here in America. St Patrick's day had previously been celebrated with a dinner, like the one recorded in 1737 hosted by the Charitable Irish Societies of Boston, or in 1762 hosted by John Marshall near St Peter's Church in New York City. However, when local Irish regiments were invited to attend, they marched in military manner to the banquet. The first march we've found reference to was held in 1766, with fifes and drums and all, and a tradition was born. Years later, when many Irish marched away under Washington's banner to help establish this new nation, civilians still paraded in the cities on March 17. General Washington even observed the feast in the field by making the password on March 17: St Patrick. As a result, it can be said that honoring the memory of our patron saint became one of America's first traditions.

In the years that followed, this Irish American tradition was exported around the world with the result that today, there are at least 250 annual parades in honor of our patron saint across 44 states, in addition to countless parades in Ireland, Canada, Australia, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, Buenos Aires, and every country to which the children of Erin have been scattered. But it all formally started in New York, right after the American Revolution when, in 1784, the Friendly Sons of St Patrick were formed, and soon took over organizing the parade in lower Manhattan. In 1790, a Brooklyn parade was organized, and another -

organized by a convention of Irish Societies - soon followed. By 1843, and for some years thereafter, there were two major parades in Manhattan as well as the one in Brooklyn with the parade organized by the Convention of Irish Societies gradually emerging as the main one. In 1853, the Ancient Order of Hibernians first marched, and thus began an association that led to their assuming responsibility for that event. Today, a committee made up of AOH members still plans, organizes, and manages the annual march which has become the largest ethnic demonstration in the world.

In the early days, the route of the parade required a great deal of stamina to complete. As the city grew, the parades got longer. The 1899 parade started at Washington Square and marched to Brommans Union Park for the traditional banquet. Brommans was located at 133 St and Willis Ave in the Bronx - a distance of about six miles from the starting point. It was the only time the parade entered that borough, although the Bronx was not the only borough to have been visited by the Manhattan parade, for the Brooklyn Hibernians took the parade over the Brooklyn Bridge to march in their streets several times. In 1909, another borough entered the picture as the Queens AOH - 1,000 strong - were given the honor of becoming the first to cross the recently completed, but as yet unopened, Queensborough Bridge. That honor was accorded in recognition of the Irish laborers who constructed the span. After parading through Queens, they proudly marched over the new bridge to join the New York parade, led by a unit of Silver Greys - AOH members over 70 years in age - in horse-drawn carriages. The record for the longest parade however, was established in 1904 when the annual march started at 26th street and Fifth Ave, marched to 126 St, turned west to Seventh Ave, then north again to 155th St, and proceeded west again to the Manhattan Casino at 155th St and Eighth Ave - a distance of 8 miles.

Today, there are parades in many local communities on dates surrounding March 17. As in the beginning, there is still a common link between them all. On the one hand, that link is the common reverence for St Patrick which all true Irishmen cherish. On the opposite extreme they are all subject to the terrible Paddy-bashing of the media prompted by misbehaving **Amadans\*** in green plastic derby's, drinking green beer! Each year on March 17th, there are those who drag our heritage through the streets, and those who parade it. St. Patrick's Day is not an excuse for a party, but a reason for pride - pride in an Irish Christian heritage that is second to none. Those who debase themselves on that day are either not Irish or are Irish in name only, and their condition at the end of the day is a direct reflection of their appreciation for, or ignorance of,

their own heritage. Further, those who respect that heritage don't call their patron saint by a nickname; the difference between Paddy's Day and St. Patrick's Day is the difference between the office Christmas party and Midnight Mass - the only thing they have in common is the date.

**\*Amadan - Village Idiot**