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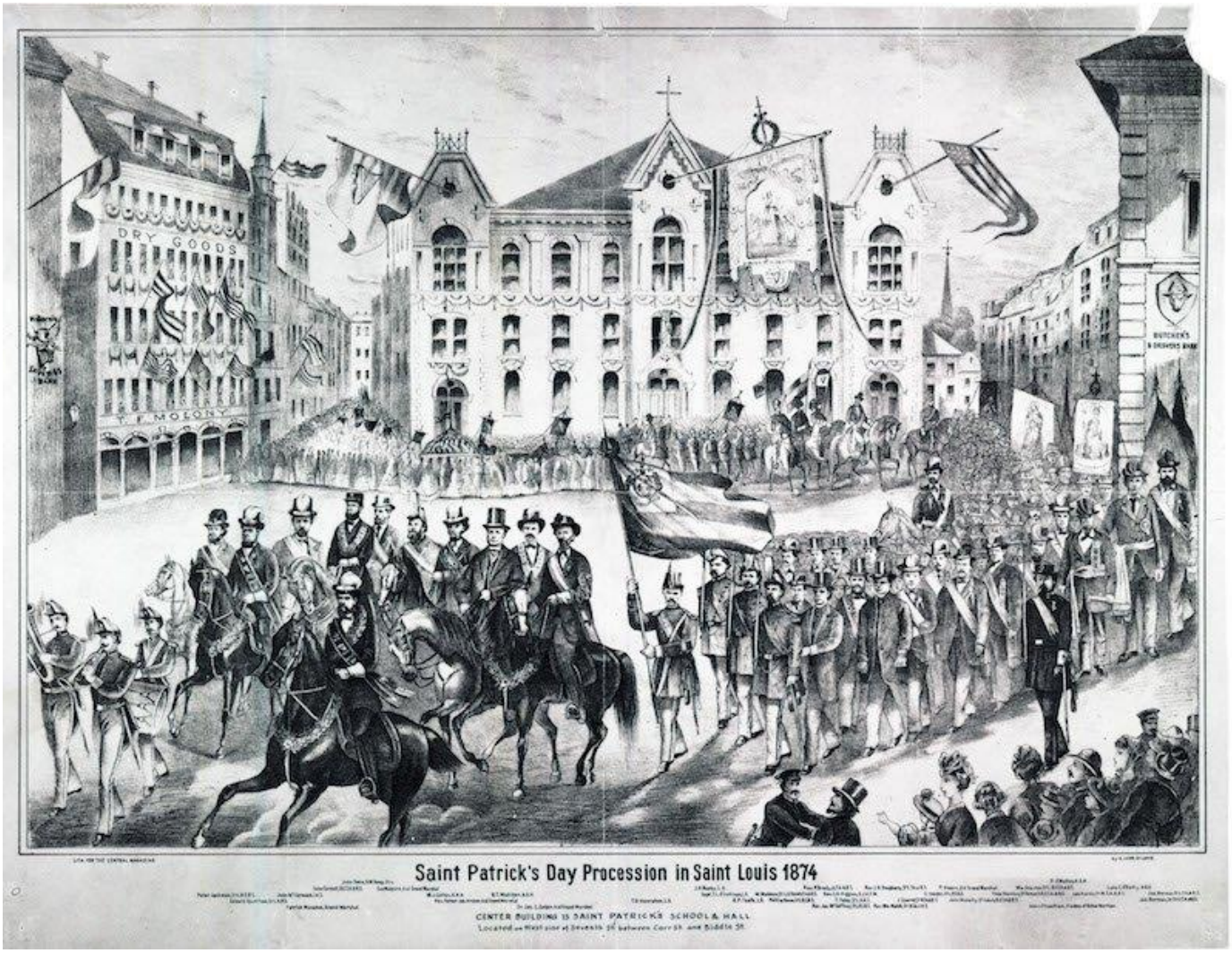

Of Cabbages and Kings

One of St. Louis' most Irish neighborhoods, the Kerry Patch was all but gone 100 years ago—but its memory refuses to fade.

BY STEFENE RUSSELL ST LOUIS MAGAZINE

No one has ever tried to dye the Mississippi River green. If March 17 falls on a Monday, you'll have to take off work to attend the Ancient Order of Hibernians' St. Patrick's Day Parade in Dogtown (where you can eat corned beef and cabbage at St. James the Greater Catholic Church). Otherwise, you can go to the downtown St. Patrick's Day Parade, held the weekend before or after the actual holiday.

In those respects, St. Louis is not like Boston, Chicago, or even Cleveland. But that's not to say St. Louis isn't an Irish town.

When the first St. Patrick's Day Parade wound through the city, in 1820, one-seventh of the city's 700 men were Irish. By 1851, when the U.S. census recorded a St. Louis population of 70,000, approximately 14 percent of those people were born in Ireland. Today, Dogtown is considered to be St. Louis' most Irish neighborhood. But between the mid-19th century and the early 20th century, no place in the city was more Irish than the Kerry Patch.

Its origin dates back to 1842, when a group of Irish immigrants arrived here—apparently from County Kerry, hence the name. Being quite poor but not wanting to live in crowded, dank rooming houses, they settled on a stretch of open land north of downtown. "Luckily for them, the commons was owned by John Mullanphy's heirs, who chose to ignore the squatters," writes historian Etan Diamond in a 1989 article for *Gateway Heritage*. (When Mullanphy died, in 1833, he was said to be the richest man in the Mississippi River Valley.) "The immigrants quickly built homes, small, makeshift shanties arranged along no particular street pattern," Diamond continues. "These irregular and poorly constructed homes gave rise to the derogatory term 'Shanty Irish.'"

The neighborhood's boundaries shifted over time—Irish families moved farther west, as German, Polish, and Eastern European immigrants settled around them after the Civil War. But during its heyday, the Patch was generally described as

being between N. 15th Street and Hogan Street, Division Street and Cass Avenue. The heart of the neighborhood was squeezed into the tight rectangle between 16th and 18th streets, Cass Avenue and O'Fallon Street—a few blocks east of St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in near north St. Louis.

In the early 19th century, emigrants left Ireland to escape English political oppression. By 1847, during the height of An Gorta Mór, The Great Hunger, they flooded out of the country to escape starvation and death. As Diamond notes, the immigrants' sheer numbers, as well as their religious affiliation—Catholic—did not endear them to second- and third-generation American Protestants, specifically the nativist Know Nothing movement, founded in 1845, the year the potato famine began. The level of disdain and outright hostility toward Irish immigrants in major American cities, including St. Louis, was reflected in ads for housekeepers, which indicated "NO IRISH NEED APPLY." Earlier Irish immigrants who had blended into St. Louis society also castigated the new arrivals for not working hard enough to assimilate, Diamond adds. Patchers responded by banding together.

"Few outsiders ventured into the strange world of the Kerry Patch," Diamond wrote, "and few insiders would have wanted them there."

That did not stop *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporters from piggybacking on policemen's rounds and publishing lurid accounts of life in the Patch. The articles described tenements with nicknames like Thunder Alley, Wild Cat Chute, and Fort Sumpter. One reporter described an elderly couple that was so poor, they shared a set of false teeth. "Come on, old woman," the husband reportedly said, sitting at a table with a plate of food. "Give me the teeth." So they went, back and forth, "like a weaver's shuttle, busily plying the teeth, until the meal is done."

In the 1878 guidebook *A Tour of St. Louis,* J.A. Dacus and James Buel wrote an entire chapter about the Kerry Patch, using the words "wretch" and "wretched" more than a dozen times. "On their pathway never a stray sunbeam falls," the

purple prose began. “Parents very poor, and often dissipated and vicious, their homes are grimy, filthy abodes which must necessarily extinguish every lofty aspiration… The hinges of the windows are often broken, the doors down, and bundles of rags often do service to keep the wind from circulating too freely, because of broken window panes.”

Dacus and Buel listed the residents’ chief amusements as “punching each other’s eyes,” as well as “dogfights and cocking mains.” Patchers were also described as untidy, religious, animated, and—the authors adopt a note of incredulity here—cheerful. “On Sundays and holidays these poor wretches go abroad and engage in pastimes,” the authors wrote, shocked, “and talk as cheerfully and laugh as lightly as though they were dwellers in marble halls.”

A more balanced account came in February 1949, when *Post-Dispatch* reporter Frank O’Hare wrote a rhapsodic, almost stream-of-consciousness reminiscence of his childhood, “Kerry Patch: A Vivid Closeup.” He described a complicated place, a “crazy-quilt of ‘neighborhoods’ each staunchly self-contained; mélange of kindly and brutal, prim and riotous, pious and profane… There were geraniums, oleanders and honeysuckle on windowsill, on porch, in yard. Little girls with flower faces; sturdy, handsome boys. Rombachs, Keoughs, Weavers, Hennesseys, Hunts, Lostermans, Gills, Kellys and O’s and Mc’s galore.”

It was a place that produced crime bosses and pickpockets, but also judges and state senators. Silent-film star King Baggot grew up in the Patch. So did William Marion Reedy, editor of *Reedy’s Mirror* and publisher of Tennessee Williams, T.S. Eliot, and Theodore Dreiser. The Patch even had a series of elected “kings,” including Dennis Sheehan, James Cullinane, and eventually Dennis’ son, Jack Sheehan, who was crowned in 1873, at the age of 21, at a huge party preceded by a neighborhood-wide torchlit procession. Sheehan, the last king of the Patch, paid rent for people who could not, helped mitigate legal disputes, and organized an annual Fourth of July fireworks show.

For weeks after O'Hare's piece appeared, old Patchers sent in letters filled with their own memories. And yes, there were a few stories about eye-punching—the neighborhood was dubbed the "Bloody Third" District, and lots of boys belonged to street gangs, including the Biddle Gang, the Hogan Gang, and the Ashley Street Gang, which eventually turned into the crime syndicate Egan's Rats. Bollman's Brickyard, on 19th Street, was another important gathering place for boys; they would roast potatoes in the kiln ashes, swim in the clay-wetting pond, and steal bricks for gang fights. (As former resident Monsignor Joseph O'Toole recalled in his letter, "It was a familiar sound to hear the clatter of closing shutters as bricks started to fly.") There were also saloons that booked cockfighting matches in the basements, barkeeps scattering thick layers of sawdust on the earth floors and erecting circular barricades for the "rings." The roosters would be kept in burlap sacks until just before fights. Outfitted with razor-sharp "gaffs," or spurs, they fought to the death. (Those laying bets, as well as those producing fighting birds, came from every corner of the city; the Humane Society of Missouri harangued them at every step.)

More commonly, though, people remembered a close-knit place that was part village, part developing urban neighborhood. O'Hare remembered "nanny goats in every vacant lot, browsing on jimson weed and tomato can labels," and a "buck billy goat tethered in the stable, for the horses' health." There were mandolin societies, Sunday surrey rides, corner water pumps. Water for coffee and baths came from the hydrants; it was left overnight, to allow the grit and mud would settle to the bottom of the pan. As one letter-writer recalled, no one had an icebox, a gas stove, linoleum on the kitchen floor, or concrete in the basement—"only a large earthen jar with water, to keep the butter." People cooked with coal stoves, even in summer. Other people remembered lace curtains, mule-drawn streetcars, tucking cold feet into hay on the floor (which would stick to the fringe on the hems of women's skirts), and homemade bread. Bread figured into many Kerry Patchers' memories, including O'Hare's. It functioned as a kind of social currency, passed over back fences to families with

new babies, slathered with butter and apple butter and handed to hungry kids, shared from neighbor to neighbor.

The parish churches—St. Patrick's Church, St. Bridget of Erin, and St. Lawrence O'Toole—were among the most important landmarks. But so were the pubs and breweries, specifically Lafayette Brewery, where farmers got malt to feed their cattle and housewives bought yeast to make coffee cake. One man remembered Kinsky's Grocery and Saloon and anticipating the beer-delivery wagon's arrival. "We could tell his buggy by the brass hubs on the wheels," the man wrote. "We could see him a mile away, and by the time he got to Kinksy's Saloon we would all be there waiting for him. He'd set 'em up about three or four times for all the boys, real beer, not the kind you get now."

In summer, O'Hare wrote, kids had fresh pinafores and shirts pulled over their heads and were sent out to play in the street while parents gossiped over beer on whitewashed stoops. At sunset, an elderly lamplighter would make his way down the streets as "shadows fell, and the drugstores' green and ruby lights shone out." O'Hare grew up next to Fehlig Company's planing mill; the family's kitchen window faced the lumberyard. He got to know the neighborhood on his newspaper route, delivering the *Post* to 200 addresses, not just Irish families but "German, French; white and Negro; poor, comfortable, affluent. Crawford, druggist, making tinctures, extracts, salves; Petit, cigar maker; the candymaker, shining coppers, marble worktable, caramel, fondant, chocolate; the French picklemaker; Schacht's billiard table shop—slate, broadcloth, walnut wood. The old-world butcher, Kuhn, who slaughtered on Morgan Street—the rhythm of his cleavers on 'hamburger.' What corned beef! What steaks! The milkman with handbell, his bacteria-laden milk from his own cows (a measure of cream, two and a half cents). Chair-caner; rag-carpet weaver; gold-leaf signmaker; Craden's bakery, where flies sometimes mingled with the currants in the buns."

And of course, a pageant of a St. Patrick's Day Parade passed through the neighborhood every March. Leo Craden, born in his father's bakery at N. 14th and Biddle streets (home of those fly-specked currant buns), remembered it well. "The St. Patrick's Day Parade started at St. Patrick's Church, Sixth and Biddle, and came up O'Fallon to the west end of the Patch and ended at Forest Park," Craden wrote. "Some of the paraders would get out of line and go into Jost's or Kesseler's to get a beer and then rejoin their fellow marchers." Another letter writer added, "One year, Mr. Dundon, grand marshall of the St. Patrick's Day Parade, had a white horse painted green to lead the parade, and wore a silk hat and a Prince Albert coat."

In 1937, Hyde Park Brewery tore down the Lafayette Brewery malt house, which it then owned. The press reported that the brewery did so to save on taxes and noted the warrens of excellent beer caves below the demolition site. King James Cullinane's two-story brick house—once known as the finest in the Patch (and during his 10-year reign, the starting point for the St. Paddy's Day Parade)—was destroyed in 1957 to make room for "the proposed Wendell O. Pruitt Homes area," which would later be known as Pruitt-Igoe. The same month, papers noted that another of the Patch's fine brick houses, one that once housed the pastor of St. Leo's, was coming down to make room for the DeSoto-Carr housing projects.

Though traces of the Patch remain today—you can still buy two-by-fours from Fehlig's lumberyard—Diamond notes that by the end of World War I, "the original Patch had all but disappeared. The once-concentrated Irish community had dispersed; many Patch children had grown up and moved elsewhere. The St. Louis suburbs, rapidly growing since the turn of the century, proved far more attractive to them than the crowded city neighborhoods."

What's more, the Know Nothing movement had been a failure. Irish immigrants didn't have to cling together for safety anymore. And so, like their earlier brethren, they scattered, melting into the city's various pockets.

But once a year, on a cold, clear March morning, you can stand at the corner of Clayton and Tamm avenues and see many of those families' descendants in one place, the clans walking in procession or riding floats, holding family crests lovingly embroidered on silk flags.