



WHAT HAPPENED TO THE IRISH? TRY DOGTOWN

by John Brod Peters
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St. Louis has often been called the “Rome of the West.” Before the tall buildings took over, the Sunday afternoon sightseer could cruise up and down the river counting the spires and intoning in the process a litany of patron saints.

Irish and German immigrants had much to do with making this a city of spires, and no area was more celebrated for the beauty of its churches and the spirit of its people than “Kerry Patch,” an Irish neighborhood northwest of downtown St. Louis.

The core of the area was bounded on the east and west by Sixteenth and Twenty-Second streets, and on the north and south by Cass avenue and O’Fallon street.

Now it is difficult to picture among the warehouses and apartment projects which occupy the area the close knit Irish colony with its houses shoulder to shoulder, the lace-curtained windows looking out on gaslight streets, the corner pubs, the parochial zeal of its churches, the militant politics of its inhabitants – all alive with an indefinable mystique more at home in Galway or Kilkenny than in a French colonial settlement on the mighty Mississippi.

But the Irish apparently didn’t consider their Kerry Patch a kind of Babylonian captivity. They took to their new soil with a vengeance. Militant societies were formed, and an Irish nationalist rally at the Old Courthouse 100 years ago filled the place to the rafters. So great was the spirit of the St. Louis Irish, in fact, that Kerry Patch could not contain its own Hibernian enthusiasm on St. Patrick’s Day, the feast of Ireland’s apostle and patron.

Every March 17, therefore, the whole city enjoyed the invasion of an Irish army in the form of an annual St. Patrick’s Day parade.

Even the militant Irish, however, couldn't halt the city's westward growth. Business encroached upon Kerry Patch, second and third-generation Irish grew more opulent and less enthusiastic about downtown living. They moved away to new parishes to the west, and the old neighborhood began to go down.

One by one the homes disappeared and the parishes declined or closed down. The very "Pride of the Kerry Patch" the church of St. Lawrence O'Toole, was turned into a warehouse, and its high altar received a last-minute reprieve when it was snatched from the wreckers by Msgr. Joseph O'Toole, who carried his boyhood parish altar out to his new pastorate in Glendale.

But as the Irish dispersed throughout the metropolitan area, a successor to Kerry Patch arose south of Forest Park. First known by the rather grand name of Cheltenham, the area is now better known as Dogtown (cynical Irish wags affect to prefer "Canine Heights"), a hill bounded by McCausland, Oakland, Hampton and Manchester avenues.

No one really knows how the name originated but local pub-owner Randal Dwyer — who is something of a Dogtown historian — believes that it stems from the time of the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 when poor Irish squatters, living in makeshift shanties in Forest Park, were forced by the fair to move southward to the neighboring hill. "When they had to give up their squatters' rights in the park," Mr. Dwyer said, "many of them moved over here. Most of them had space, so they kept hunting dogs. Quite a few of the people living over here descend from them."

The White House, Mr. Dwyer's pub at 6284 Clayton Ave., is one of several on the hill, and is one of the main sites of Dogtown St. Patrick's Day fetes. "I've been here about 30 years," Mr. Dwyer said, "but the place was here before — it was built as a hotel for the world's fair. Teddy Roosevelt once ate in here. I've got his picture, but of course I'm a Democrat and I can't put it up."

The White House seems to attract most of the local Irish, but much of the tourist trade tends to converge on Mr. Dwyer's nearest rival, O'Shea's Shamrock Bar.

O'Shea's lies at the very heart of Dogtown, where Clayton and Tamm avenues cross, and was founded over 20 years ago by the late Jack O'Shea, a state representative and man of no small influence.

Mr. O'Shea started the traditional corned beef and cabbage buffet on St. Patrick's feast, and the custom is maintained by the present owner, Norman Journey.

Mr. Journey is a fledgling publican, having just acquired O'Shea's last November. It is not unlikely that he faces his first St. Patrick's day with some apprehension at the hordes of enthusiastic day-long Irishmen who will descend upon him from all corners of the city.

"We will welcome as many as we can handle and just try to make it a happy day," said Mr. Journey. "I grew up in the neighborhood and I've come here myself for years."

But after the last bit of corned beef is gone and weary bartenders have mopped up the last drop of spilled grog, Dogtown Irish will have 364 days to enjoy before the next patronal feast. It is the day to day routine which really characterizes the community.

Just as Kerry Patch gloried in the church of St. Lawrence O'Toole, so Dogtown proudly boasts the parish of St. James the Greater, whose stately church with its slender copper spire dominates the area from the summit of the hill.

Until recently, every pastor of the parish had been born on Irish soil, and much of the spirit of the neighborhood derives from the stout Hibernian piety of these stalwart and outspoken leaders — men as ready to pronounce upon social and political matters as on things spiritual, as though serene in the typically Irish assumption that Holy Orders somehow confers a universal doctorate.

Their uncompromising sincerity so greatly inspired their people that parish teen-agers are as likely to meet at Mass as they are on the dance floor or the playing field — and are likely to do all three under church auspices.

Bob Corbett, who directs the seven parish soccer teams, noted that the parish had recently sponsored the "Little Shamrock Basketball Tournament," in which 16 teams from various city parishes participated. When the St. James team won on its home ground, however, the fighting Irish weren't embarrassed by the victory.

But there is more to parish life in Dogtown than teams and teen towns. The adults are active, too, and will gather Friday night for a St. Patrick's Day celebration. They won't break out the corned beef until midnight, however because "most of us don't eat meat on Friday during Lent," observed Mrs. Corbett.

The soundness and stability of the area is witnessed by the fact that property values have steadily held and that many young couples from the area who marry either stay or manage to move back to Dogtown from elsewhere.

Thus the clans whose families have lived on the “Irish Hill” for generations, people with names like Brady, Dwyer, O’Shaughnessy and Gittins, stay where they are because they apparently know that the greenest grass grows right beneath their feet.

And maybe they’re a wee bit glad to be living where they are because the pubs in Ireland are closed on St. Patrick’s Day, it’s a national holiday and almost everything is closed.

Observes Randal Dwyer, “Only the snakes are loose that day.” Not so On Dogtown’s hill, praised be St. Patrick!