

Clayton St. Patrick's Day parade salutes 'extended Irish family'

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The Ancient Order of Hibernians held a St. Patrick's Day Parade of a slightly different color Saturday — subdued green.

Not a drop of beer was spilled, not a note sounded from a brass band, not a harsh word was spoken and not a fist was swung as more than 700 people of Irish descent paraded as family units through the streets of Clayton to honor Ireland's patron saint.

"The idea was to honor St. Patrick by expressing our appreciation for our Irish heritage," said the Rev. James Winzerling, the Hibernians' Missouri state chaplain. "We wished to put forth the idea of the family as a unit and as part of an extended Irish family . . . and I believe it came off that way."

THE PARADE included a minimum of clowns and jugglers and a political sign or two, but the event was calm and orderly, characterized best by groups of smiling, waving, red-haired and freckled children.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians is not a frivolous group. The chapters in this country were first founded in New York in the 1830s as a band of sword-wielding Irishmen whose purpose was to protect the then-often harrassed Catholic priests.

The parade in Clayton — the first of many, organizers said — was a parade to show off chest-swelling pride, not head-swelling braggadocio.

An estimated 2,000 spectators braved a chilly, uncomfortable mist to line the 11-block parade route from Big Bend and Forsyth boulevards through Clayton to a party at the Clayton Community Center in Shaw Park. There the beer and live music finally broke loose.

THE MAJORITY of the 35 units in the parade were families — clans — large and small, who strolled past the St. Louis County Government Center under banners and family crests declaring their Irish roots. There were the Sullivans and the O'Sullivans, the O'Connors and the Flynns, the Sheehans and the O'Sheas.

There were of course a few commercial entries, such as a group of employees from "O'Schnucks Markets."

They walked and rode in cars, trucks and fire engines among various color guards and high school and grade school pom-pom girls. They wore the green. (An old family basset hound was even dyed the color of a dirty shamrock).

The orderly calm of the parade was expected by most of the spectators, who also came in apparent family groups.

It was so orderly, in fact, that even

parade and city officials were a little surprised.

"**WE WERE GETTING** a cleanup committee together to pick up trash along the route," said parade official Jim Sheerin as the party began at the community center. "But when it was over we looked around and there wasn't any."

Some who came to the parade wearing the traditional plastic green hats and expecting a loud boisterous affair were left a little puzzled.

Keeven Fulton, 32, of South St. Louis, came "in search of the green beer," although the leprechaun named Charlie he claimed to have on his shoulder preferred Irish whiskey, he said. Both Fulton and Charlie continued their search unquenched.

And then there were those like Florissant's Bob Crane, 52, half Irish and half German ("a mean combination"), who enjoyed the family flavor of the event, but obviously was using it only to warm up his head-to-toe green outfit complete with an "Irish and Proud of It" button.

"I'll be heading for a party at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Florissant," he said. "And when they close the hall, we'll go to somebody's house until the sun comes up, I'll bet."