

MISSOURI
MASTERS
AND
THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTS

“You’ll Never Get Ireland in America”:
Irish Traditional Music and Dance in St. Louis, Missouri



Photograph by David Whitman

Larry McNally playing the button-box accordion at the Missouri Heritage Fair in St. Louis, May, 1993.

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MISSOURI FOLK ARTS PROGRAM

St. Louis, Missouri boasts a small but active Irish-American community whose historic roots stretch back to the early nineteenth century. Clearly eclipsed by Boston, Chicago, and New York City (among others) in both immigrant and American-born Irish, St. Louis has nevertheless distinguished itself in the last decade as an important center of traditional Irish music and dance in America. A number of St. Louis' "movers and shakers" in Irish music and dance have participated in Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, among them masters Patrick Gannon, Helen Gannon, Niall Gannon, Larry McNally, and apprentices Gregory Krone and Eileen Gannon. This essay is based in large part on interviews with these talented and dedicated traditional artists.



Patrick Gannon sings "The Sick Note," a humorous song, at the Walt Disney Children's Festival in Jefferson City, May, 1994. Seated behind him are (left to right) daughter Eileen and wife Helen.

The Irish in St. Louis

The vast majority of Irish immigrants came to the United States as a result of the disastrous potato famine in 1846-7, which began a flow of emigration that continues to this day. However, there was already a significant Irish population in the United States prior to that time. A large influx of Protestant Scots-Irish immigrants in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries settled primarily in the upland south from Appalachia to the Ozarks. Historian Dennis Clark postulates that Irish Catholics who escaped from indentured servitude may have settled in this region as early as the 1600s and 1700s, blending in with their Presbyterian neighbors. Clark writes,

Changing identities, names and dwellings, they rooted themselves in the fastnesses beyond the Eastern seaboard. Their spirit persists until today from the Endless Mountains of Pennsylvania to the Ozarks, as does their vibrant legacy of Irish music!¹

Whether Scots-Irish or Irish Catholic in derivation (or a combination thereof), the Celtic roots of American old-time fiddle music and dance — Appalachian clogging and Ozark jigging in particular — are unmistakable. Button-box accordion player Larry McNally remarks on the obvious kinship between an Ozark hoedown and what he assumes to be its Irish antecedent:

Like for instance one night when Greg was playin' for me, he says, "I'd like to play you," he says, "a tune from Arkansas." And the tune was called "Leather Britches." That's what they called it in Arkansas. And he played it, and he played the two parts of it and he finished. And I says to him, "I'll play the whole version for you now." And I played the third part for him. And I says to him, "That's Lord McDondald's Reel." And it came from Ireland. But somehow it got to Arkansas and went astray down there.²

Old-time music and dance reveal the impact the Irish had on shaping early American frontier culture. In St. Louis the Irish influence is clearly documented from the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the city was evolving from a French village into a major American trading center. Accompanying the Anglo-Americans who flooded St. Louis at this time was a core group of about one hundred educated, well-to-do Irishmen who rose to prominence and became known as "The Irish Crowd." Foremost among them were John Mullanphy, a native of County Fermanagh, and his son, Bryan, who became mayor of St. Louis in 1847. John Mullanphy, at one time reputed to be the wealthiest man in St. Louis, helped establish the city's first hospital and numerous philanthropic organizations. His son Bryan showed similar concern for the poor in his work with the St. Vincent DePaul Society

and in setting up, with his own money, the “Bryan Mullanphy Emigrant and Traveler’s Relief Fund.” This foundation of Irish public service and respectability created a relatively hospitable environment for the desperate Famine immigrants who began to arrive in 1847.³

The Famine Irish, as they came to be known, represented the most destitute, illiterate part of the population which was most disastrously affected by the failure of the potato crop. Newly arrived Irish immigrants to St. Louis and elsewhere quickly occupied the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder as unskilled laborers. They settled predominantly in a shanty town on the outskirts of the city that came to be known as “Kerry Patch.” But at least in St. Louis they encountered a firmly established Catholic Church and a small but powerful Irish upper class with a record of public service. This relative lack of overt discrimination allowed the St. Louis Irish immigrants and their children to advance more rapidly in social and economic standing than those who settled on the eastern seaboard.⁴

The price of successful assimilation to the American mainstream, however, often seems to lie in cultural loss. The Famine immigrants were poor and illiterate, yes, but they were also the bearers of an ancient, highly sophisticated Celtic folk culture. The majority were Gaelic speakers, and among them were, no doubt, numerous oral poets, storytellers, musicians and dancers. Yet few of their traditional arts took root initially on American soil. Timothy Meagher writes,

Even within the Irish community immigrants bitterly lamented that the new American-born Irish generation seemed thoroughly Americanized. Old Irish folk songs had given way to tin pan alley tunes, jigs to “the turkey trot,” the hurley stick to the baseball bat. The rich folk culture of Ireland was lost forever, drowned in American mass culture or abandoned in pursuit of a “bleached out respectability.”⁵

St. Patrick’s Day parades and Irish American popular music epitomized by sentimental tunes such as “I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen” or “Bantry Bay” came to represent Irish ethnic identity to

twentieth century Americans. The American version of Irish identity — plastic green shamrocks and red-haired leprechauns in cereal commercials — bears little resemblance to the rich folk culture mentioned here. Larry McNally makes no effort to conceal his disgust at what he calls “puddin’ music”:

Like...this “Danny Boy,” that’s American. That’s not Irish. “When Irish Eyes Are Smilin’” — Bing Crosby made a million off of that. I wouldn’t mess with it. I refuse to play that. The chances are if you sang that in a house session [in Ireland] you might get a poke in the teeth from somebody! It’s an insult to the real music.⁶

Fiddler Niall Gannon also decries commercial Irish ethnic markers:

I’m not doing anything for myself by dressing up on St. Patrick’s Day or wearing “Kiss Me, I’m Irish” buttons. “When Irish Eyes Are Smilin’”...green beer and buttons and funny hats and things that they do on St. Patrick’s Day, that bothers us bad, you know.⁷

The notion that Irish folk culture “was lost forever” in America is, however, clearly an exaggeration. There were Irish dancing masters in New York City as early as 1741.⁸ New York City has continued to be a major enclave for Irish traditional music

up through the twentieth century; in fact it was there that the earliest commercial recordings of Irish fiddle music, played by the now legendary Michael Coleman, were produced.⁹ Prior to the recent surge in popularity of Irish dance and music in the past two decades, St. Louis was blessed with a number of Irish dance masters, among them the beloved Pete Sullivan (now retired), and Conn O’Sullivan, who taught for the past thirty years.¹⁰ Irish traditional music and dance have been passed down in the privacy of the home for quite some time in America, revitalized by the constant flow of new immigrants from Ireland. This artistic heritage, however, was for many years virtually unknown outside of particular enclaves where it flourished.

A Brief History of Irish Music and Dance

Contemporary Irish folk musicians and dancers often say that their tunes and steps are hundreds of years old. Because of the lack of documentation, however, today’s form of Irish music and dance can only be traced as far back as the eighteenth century.¹¹ Prior to that time, there were basically two strains of Irish music: the courtly harp music, associated with the nobility, and the peasant music.



Niall Gannon (right) and apprentice Kevin Buckley play a reel called “Sally Gardens” at their regular weekly lesson. December, 1993.

In the process of colonizing Ireland the English government enacted harsh legislation over several centuries aimed at destroying, among other things, the courtly music tradition, which was thought to be seditious. A statute enacted in 1603 included an order by Queen Elizabeth to “hang the harpers wherever found and destroy their instruments.”¹¹ The music of the peasantry, however, proved more difficult to eradicate.

Niall Gannon recalls stories told to him by his parents of how the peasants managed to keep the tunes and dances from dying out:

That’s what happened in Ireland, you know. When the British came it was against the law to ceili dance. That’s why the tin whistle was so popular. Because they’d shove it into their pants and the soldiers couldn’t see it. And they’d go behind the hedges in the fields and they’d have their ceilis in the fields and then no one would catch them doing it.¹²

These clandestine gatherings did not escape the notice of all Englishmen, as evi-



Eileen Gannon pauses on her Irish harp at St. Louis Irish Arts’ monthly ceili at the White House. March, 1994. The Irish harp, once restricted to Irish court music, has been adopted as part of folk music ensembles in this century.

denced by a 1674 English traveler’s report claiming that Ireland had “in every field a fiddle and the lasses footing it till they are all of a foam.”¹³ In spite of the laws against it, Irish music and dance have continued to develop and flourish up to the present day, adopting musical ideas and instruments from Scotland, England, and the continent along the way.

In 1927, the same year Ireland gained its independence, the Folklore of Ireland Society was founded (An Cumann le Béaloideas Éirann). The Irish Dance Commission was established shortly after in 1929, followed by the Irish Folklore Institute in 1930 and Comhaltas Ceoltoírí Éireann (Music and Culture of Ireland) in 1951. All of these state sponsored organizations share the goal of documenting as much of Irish folk-life and folk arts as possible before their anticipated demise. Sen O Súilleabháin’s *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, quite possibly the most detailed guide to collecting folklore ever written, was similarly inspired by a fervent nationalistic effort to reclaim Irish culture and identity. A passage from the introduction reads:

We have suffered great cultural loss as a nation, and can ill afford to let pass unrecorded and unappreciated the spirit of Ireland, the traditions of the historic Irish nation...We desire to see them known and honored, for the Ireland of tomorrow will have need of them.¹⁴

In the 1950s Ciaran McMathúna, who was employed by Radio Erin, went all over Ireland recording singers, musicians and storytellers, and then broadcast them on a weekly show that aired nationally. Patrick Gannon recalls the impact McMathúna’s radio show had on him:

He collected these wonderful songs, stories and music. And he in fact got most of it in the poverty ridden areas of Ireland where they owned almost nothing, they lived from hand to mouth. And they had the most wonderful stuff. He would broadcast the week he would collect them. And it was complete magic. I still remember that man’s voice clearer than the people I talked to yesterday because he made such an impression on me. This man was God to me.¹⁵

Ironically, widespread electricity — the very thing that made it possible for McMathúna to record traditional music with his electrically powered tape recorder and share it with the nation — simultaneously undermined the survival of Irish folk arts. Patrick Gannon, again, explains:

Rural electrification started in the ‘50s. Tape recorders and radios became very common. And of course American influence — country and western and ballroom music — came in in a massive way. And at that stage the feeling was that what we had ourselves really wasn’t worth much. So the children began to align themselves with the modern stuff that was coming in.¹⁶

In spite of the onslaught of American popular arts, Irish music and dance have survived into the 1990s with a vengeance. In the past two decades traditional Irish music and dance have experienced a breath-taking revival. Irish dance schools and branches of Comhaltas Ceoltoírí Éireann have proliferated all over the English-speaking world. Irish traditional music has been introduced to broader audiences by recording groups such as *The Chieftains* and *De Danaan*.

This explosion of popularity carries with it another threat to the integrity of Irish traditional arts, one which organizations such as the Irish Dance Commission and Comhaltas Ceoltoírí Éireann are attempting to modify. The impact of the tape recorder, highly formalized competitions, and the market have introduced very rapid changes to both music and dance. Once so interdependent, Irish traditional music and dance are growing apart. The music is increasingly listened to rather than danced to, and the steps are increasingly danced to recorded music rather than to live musicians. Larry McNally comments, for example, that “The youth of today they’re absolutely marvelous, but they’re playin’ terrible fast altogether.” Step dancers find it difficult to dance to the fast tempos and are relying more and more on recorded music, which can be slowed down to accommodate their elaborate foot work. The challenge faced by traditional dancers and musicians today is how to reconcile the accelerating drive for innovation with the beauty and wisdom of the inherited tradition.

A Description of Irish Traditional Music and Dance

The intimate connection between traditional dance and music is made instantly clear when analyzing Irish instrumental folk music. With the exception of slow airs and marches, it is essentially composed of dance tunes. The indigenous rhythms consist of jigs, reels, and hornpipes. Polkas and waltzes from the Continent were a later addition to the repertoire. In the absence of instruments, a singer would “lilt” for dancers. Linting is the singing of a dance tune without words, using nonsense syllables such as “dithery-diddle-doodle-didle” to carry the tune. Patrick Gannon explains that when he was growing up in the vicinity of Galway on the West Coast of Ireland,

The only entertainment may have been one instrument, a fiddle or a flute, sometimes no fiddle, no flute, so what they would have would be a singer. Now if that singer could lilt, then they could dance. So I learned linting also. So the lilter would lilt and they would dance the reel, the hornpipe, and the jig, which are the three basic dances. The reel would be the group dancing, the jigs and the hornpipe if there were single dancers. And lilters were held in high esteem.¹⁷

Traditional Irish instrumental music is based on a melody line which is varied through ornamentation: rolls, slides and grace notes. The music was originally played by a solo musician or at a “seisiún ceoil” (music session), where the melody was played in unison by various instrumentalists. Chordal accompaniment appears to be a later development, as the instruments used today for chording — such as guitar and piano — were not adopted until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The oldest instruments are undoubtedly the fiddle, the uilleann pipes, and the tin whistle, all of which are still used to play the melody. The Irish harp was, until recently, used only in the court music. In the nineteenth century the melodion, concertina, mouth organ and accordion were adopted, followed in the nineteenth century by the banjo, mandolin, piano, guitar, and bouzouki.¹⁸



(Left to right) Step dancers Meg Shannon and Kelly Winter dance at the monthly ceili. Irish step dance costumes have evolved in this century from a simple, floor length skirt and blouse to these elaborate, above the knee velvet dresses complete with lace collars, small capes, and embroidered designs adapted from ancient Irish illuminated manuscripts. March, 1994.

By its very nature, Irish folk music must be learned primarily by ear. What makes an Irish tune is not the reproduction of a bare melody line, but the creative variation of that line — which changes not only from player to player, but each time a single musician performs it. Niall Gannon describes how he plays a particular tune on the fiddle:

Like when I play “Drowsy Maggie” I always do this one: (plays two lines with a roll in the same place each time). But when Greg plays it he might go: (plays it with a slide). That might be his cup of tea. But I like the roll. And then the second time around I might put the bowing into it and just do it a little bit different like that (demonstrates). And then I might take one of Greg’s slides if it really gets boring

and I’m running out of stuff, I might put a slide in there, and he might put one of mine in there. But that’s what’s the neat thing about the music, is everybody’s will come out different.¹⁹

The fluidity and creativity in Irish traditional music means that each musician is essentially a composer who alters and recreates the tune with every playing. No one version of a tune is ever the definitive version, because the tune is constantly changing. As one Irish musician put it, “Everyone has a bit of it and no one has it all.”²⁰

Ireland is as famed for its songs as its instrumental music. O Súilleabháin lists twenty-eight categories of songs, including lullabies, laments, love songs, drinking



St. Louis Irish Arts dancer Meg Shannon prepares to dance for the judge at the winter Feis Cheoil agus Rince (Music and Dance Competition) held in St. Louis in February, 1994. Note her straight posture, the traditional stance of the Irish step dancer, and her soft shoes. Meg is also one of Patrick Gannon's apprentices this year in sean-nós singing.

songs, hunting songs, patriotic songs, and historical ballads to name a few. Until recently, most traditional songs were sung a cappella. Sean-nós or "old style" Irish singing from the West Coast is still sung solo without instrumental accompaniment. Patrick Gannon explains:

It's always a cappella. Never accompanied. Some of those songs [sean-nós] are so complicated that it would be extremely hard to accompany them and you would ruin the beauty of the song by having somebody accompany them.²¹

Songs would be interspersed with dancing and instrumental music at house gatherings and other social events. According to Patrick Gannon,

When the dancers would want a break the singer would sing a song and usually a very long a cappella song — there was no other way to do it — so the singer was in high demand.²²

Because of its subtlety and complexity — and the fact that many of the songs are in Gaelic — sean-nós as a singing style has yet to gain the broad audience that other kinds of songs and instrumental music has gained. Comparing sean-nós singing with Irish step dance, ethnomusicologist James Cowdery identifies an underlying artistic principle:

The aesthetic of understatement stands out. In traditional Irish step-dancing, the dancer's entire upper body is immobile while the feet and legs produce complex rhythmic patterns. The normal Irish artistic restraint combined with a minute attention to intricate patterns is exhibited in the dance just as surely as in the sean-nós style of singing.²³

Irish traditional dance falls into three categories: ceili dance, set dance, and step dance. Ceili and set are group dances that are similar to American square dance. Irish and Scots-Irish immigrants undoubtedly introduced their group dances to the United States back in the eighteenth century, and these evolved into American square dance. Normally danced to a reel or a polka, ceili and set dances require groups of eight couples in each set. Set dances are named after specific counties, like "The Cashel Set," while ceili dances have names like "The Siege of Ennis." Ceili dancing is considered to be easier than set dancing. The individually performed step dance is far more intricate and athletically challenging than ceili or set. In step dance the body is held, as described above, as straight as an arrow with the arms next to the body, forcing all of the attention on the legs and feet. Hornpipes and some reels are danced with hard shoes which act as a kind of percussive instrument accenting the music, and jigs and other reels are danced with the soft shoes, which make no sound at all.

The step dancing has changed greatly over the past several decades due to the advent of recorded music (which can be slowed down electronically to allow greater complexity in the steps), innovations in the hard shoes, and influences from ballet, tap dance and modern dance. Irish dance instructor Helen Gannon puts today's Irish step dance in two categories: "traditional" and "competition." While contemporary

competition dancers do impressive leaps covering a lot of ground, the older, more traditional dancers confined their steps to a small space. Patrick Gannon recalls people dancing on doors:

If there were single dancers, they would take a door off its hinges and the dancer would dance on the door and make almighty sound because that was a sounding board. A door was the best, because it really resonated the sound of the dancer's toes and heels.²⁴

The informal, spontaneous contexts for music and dance still comparatively common in Ireland have their counterparts in the United States in organized competitions, concerts, and bar performances. This shift from informal to formal contexts is effecting a change in technique and style particularly in the dance form. Both dance and music are moving from distinct regional styles to a more homogeneous form.

Contexts for Dance and Music in Ireland

For at least the last two centuries in Ireland, opportunities to learn traditional dance and music came both from family and neighbors at home, and from itinerant dance or music "masters." These traveling masters would visit a village for the duration of several weeks, during which time they taught their skills to the youth for the price of room and board. Particular dance steps, tunes or ornament preferences can often be traced back to famous masters who strongly influenced the development of certain regional styles. In this sense, Irish arts are particularly well suited for a Folk Arts Apprenticeship program, as the concept of "master" coupled with an intensive period of study is an established part of the learning tradition. This correlation of teaching methodologies has no doubt contributed to the success that St. Louis' Irish musicians and dancers have found in working with the Missouri Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program.

Traditional music and dance remain deeply embedded in everyday social life in Ireland even today. Larry McNally grew up

in Kilkenny in the 1950's, one of ten children in a household where everyone played traditional music by ear. His father played button box accordion, his mother sang, and his grandmother played the melodion. He describes his grandmother:

She sat by the fire playin' her melodion and if you walked up to the door and you knocked and you looked in, the chances are you may not see her. She'd never clean the chimney in the house and the house would be always full of smoke. And she'd be in there in the middle of the smoke and she'd be playin' away.²⁵

McNally recalls frequent house dances and harvest parties:

House dances were a big thing when I was growin' up. One week they'd come to my house, next week they'd go to somebody else's house. Then in the autumn when they had the threshin' season, you know, there was always a dance after that. And beer was carried around in a galvanized bucket. And they'd party away, and like it was every neighbor would get together and go to the threshin'. You would have the step dancin' and the ceili dancin'. But it was so different than it is now. There was nothing fancy about it. People there seventy, eighty years old, would batter it out on the floor if they were able to do it.²⁶

Patrick Gannon remembers that in his youth musicians, dancers and storytellers were highly valued and sought after for social events of all kinds. To illustrate, he recounts an incident when he was forced to play for a wedding against his will:

The musician was in high demand. And I would be brought to dances even when I didn't want to go. I remember I had a terrible flu once and I was in bed at eleven o'clock at night. And a truck pulled up outside the door. And the man came up and he said, "Your first cousin is married and they have no music." And I said, "Well, I'm so sick I haven't been up for three days." He got me out of the bed and got me dressed and put the accordion in the back of the truck and took me down. And it was in a barn, in a barn at the back of the house that they had cleared out and put rows of chairs around. And I perspired so much that the flu was gone at four o'clock in the mornin'!²⁷

Impromptu parlor performances are still the norm in many homes. Helen Gannon, who grew up in Limerick, comments:

Everyone that walked in the door, we had to perform for them. Which I still do today and it's a constant source of aggravation for my children. (Laughs). You know I think it's better than slides! Every time we had visitors it was the done thing to end it with a little performance of some description. My sister played the piano and my mother played the piano and my brother played the accordion, and I danced.²⁸

Apart from playing for dancers, musicians would also frequently get together for *seisiún* or "sessions," informal gatherings in homes, pubs, or on the street where musicians play more for each other than for an audience. According to McNally, sessions have recently become very popular in the pubs:

Pub sessions are very big. Like on a Tuesday night in one of the bars back home in Kilkenny, you wouldn't get anything less than eighteen musicians, eighteen to twenty-four sittin' in a circle playin'.²⁹

Competitions at fairs have been common throughout Ireland for centuries. Starting in the 1970's, state sponsored competitions organized by *Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann* and the Irish Dance Commission began to proliferate, and today offer an important training ground for aspiring young people as well as a place to honor the older tradition bearers. Patrick Gannon remarks on the sensitivity of the judges at these events:

You see old men there, some of them goin' up on crutches and walking sticks, and they are held in awe because they've got something which is dying away. Even though they technically wouldn't be as proficient as a modern fiddler or a modern box player, the judge may see some beauty there — some ornamentation or some style — and may actually award the competition to them.³⁰

Dancers and musicians come to Ireland each year from England, Canada, the United States, Luxembourg, Australia and New Zealand to compete for the world champi-

onship in such categories as "lilting," "whistling," "fiddle," "uilleann pipes," "tin whistle," and "sean-nós" singing. And a surprisingly high number of these talented youth are coming from St. Louis, Missouri.

St. Louis Irish Arts

St. Louis is not the only locale in Missouri with Irish traditional musicians and dancers; but it has by far the largest concentration of them. Irish bands "Scartaglen" from Kansas City and "Slainte" from Jefferson City bring Irish traditional instrumental and vocal music to central and west Missouri, but they are rather like cultural outposts. St. Louis owes much of its growing reputation as a thriving center of Irish arts in recent years to the Gannon family.

Patrick Gannon was born in a small town near Galway on the West Coast of



Helen Gannon holds the microphone for Kevin Buckley, who is playing a jig with his father, Jack Buckley, on the uilleann pipes, at the monthly céili.

Ireland. Both his parents were singers and lilters, and his uncle played the violin "very badly." Patrick learned to sing, lilt, play harmonica, tin whistle, and piano accordion as a youth — being primarily interested in American ballroom and cowboy music when he reached his twenties. Helen Gannon grew up in Limerick where she was passionate about step dance. She says,

I started dancing at the age of four and I

was fifteen when my mother, as a punishment, took it away from me. I was sharing a single bed with my sister, and I was constantly kicking my feet to practice the steps. And when we were eating at the table I was constantly disrupting people. So she said that she would take it away from me and she did. She later let me go back with another teacher. I stayed with her until I was about seventeen and then I gave it up entirely when I went away to nursing. I hadn't reached what they called the respected champion, it was very casual and happy and easygoing.³¹

Patrick (better known as "P.J."), Helen and their young son Sean arrived in St. Louis in 1967, with the intention of staying only a year. When that year passed and P.J. was offered a permanent position as a professor of psychiatry, Helen was horrified to realize they would be staying indefinitely. She describes her initial difficulty in adjusting to America:

Our first house in America was lovely but we didn't know where to sit. Because in Ireland you sit facing the fire. A house without a fireplace was just, you know...I was not able to focus on anything. And everyone said, "You face the television." So finally they put a TV in the middle of the room and I sat in front of the TV. Everybody was happy except me. I was miserable. And Sean came along with two brothers, Niall and Liam, soon after that. And all I could think about was how long it would take to make enough money to get back.³²

Neither Patrick nor Helen had taken their traditional music or dance skills all that seriously until they came to a place where they were no longer surrounded by them. Helen explains:

We had an accordion before we had a dining room table! So we did what kept us happy, and that was play our music and do our dancing and talk to one another. There were no teachers. So we had to learn our own way of passing on the tradition. We had to search for it and go back and grab and hold on to what we had.³³

As the children grew older, Patrick and Helen determined to teach them traditional dance and music to insure that they would fit in when they went back to Ireland.



Apprentices Melissa Lochard, who has been learning button box accordion from Larry McNally, and Kevin Buckley on fiddle, playing for the monthly ceili.

Youngest child Eileen recalls her earliest dance lessons:

I started that [step dance], mom said, as soon as I could walk. My mom and her friend, Katy, would hold either hand and I'd just bounce up and down in between them while they did the jig.³⁴

In 1972 a concert sponsored by Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Eireann featuring Ireland's finest singers, musicians and dancers, came to St. Louis. Poorly attended as it was, the Gannons were ecstatic. Helen recalls:

It was a total flop, but we were in heaven. We just thought manna had fallen out of the sky. And so we became the sponsoring group for the following twenty years and now they come every year.³⁵

Son Niall Gannon remembers the impact these concerts had on him as a boy:

Joe Burke and some of the musicians would stay over at the house because we would host the concert tour members. And we'd get tunes from them and listen to them play. And every time I saw them I wanted to be like them.³⁶

The Gannons promptly founded "St. Louis Irish Arts," a branch of Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Eireann, in 1973. At the time there were Irish dance instructors in St. Louis, but no Irish music teachers. The desire to teach their own four children Irish music expanded to a commitment to sharing these arts with the broader Irish Amer-

ican community in St. Louis, and anyone else interested.

Their search for students was aided when Patrick Gannon won the world championship for mouth organ in Ireland in 1981 and 1982. This was the first time anyone in St. Louis had received such an award, and it piqued the interest of the media. Patrick was interviewed on television, and people started calling to request Irish music lessons.

Initial efforts to teach music classes in their basement were frustrating. Helen recognized that the informal Irish cultural contexts for playing music was missing from the lives of their American students, giving them less of an incentive to stick with it. She eventually decided that the best way to attract and keep students was to combine the music with step dance lessons, which, being already familiar to the St. Louis Irish American community, had a strong appeal. Helen started teaching Irish step dance, but the problem of keeping students remained. She found she was losing her best students to other dance instructors who had been qualified by the Irish Dancing Commission. The Commission had ruled that no one could enter a competition unless they had been taught by a teacher who had passed their exam and received a certificate. So, after a year of intensive work, Helen passed the exam at the age of

45 and received her certificate in 1986. She reflects,

It was probably more important to me than my nursing degree. It was through that, then, that I was able to attract enough students. And we decided that we wouldn't do it without the music. And so we started with the tin whistle and then we bought the accordion and then we bought a couple of flutes, and we found that we had eight or nine fiddles lying around the house, so we repaired those and gave them out. And then last year we bought two harps.³⁷

In the meantime, their son Niall — who had been playing Irish music on the fiddle since he was about four — bolstered his skills by applying to Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program as an apprentice to famed Irish fiddler James Kelly in 1985-6. Helen followed soon after as an apprentice to step dancer Maureen Hall in 1986-7. Because of the scarcity of Irish traditional music and dance instructors in St. Louis at the time, Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program made a special allowance to bring in these masters from out of state. Kelly came in from Florida and Hall from California. Niall observes,

That's why my mom is so thrilled about the Apprenticeship Program. They preach the same doctrines, you know. Let's not let the old people die off and take the stuff

with them, let's keep it going.³⁸

Helen and Niall have gone on to become in-state master artists themselves, along with Patrick Gannon and Larry McNally, through the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. McNally came to the United States in 1982, making his living at the time as an itinerant musician. He began working with St. Louis Irish Arts in 1985, playing for their monthly ceilis and tutoring students on the button-box accordion. To date the Gannons and McNally have worked with a total of seventeen apprentices: Linda Herndon, Meghan O'Connor, Sarah Casey, Michelle Sheets, Eileen Gannon, and Lindsay Grindstaff on tin whistle; Molly Bunton, Kathleen McCann, Margaret McMurry, Kathleen Blackwood and Christine Thompson in Irish step dance; Brian Hazelton and Melissa Lochar on button box accordion; Gregory Krone and Kevin Buckley on Irish fiddle; and Meg Shannon, Katie Mallon, Rachel Cameron and Amelia Flood in sean-nós singing. In addition to the above master artists associated with St. Louis Irish Arts, another notable Irish musician in the greater St. Louis area has participated in the Apprenticeship Program, flute player Barbara McDonald. McDonald has taught two apprentices, Elliott Ribner and Jody Jourdan.

Patrick Gannon comments on the role

the Apprenticeship Program has had in stimulating the other students at St. Louis Irish Arts:

The apprenticeship is really what pushes them on. When you're doing an apprentice you really put your best behind it, because they're going to be the role models for the others. The important thing is that they don't hide it. So we bring them out in March and they perform to audiences, and that's where their confidence develops. In fact they get so confident that they get very cheeky.³⁹

The master artists take care in selecting talented, committed students to be their apprentices. Niall Gannon had a very specific reason for choosing to work with Greg Krone in 1990-1. Niall was attending military school and was concerned that there would be no one to play fiddle for the weekly dance lessons and monthly ceilis organized by St. Louis Irish Arts should he be called to active service. Niall explains that, prior to applying for the apprenticeship,

Greg was going to those ceili classes and playing for four hours for these dancers. While I was away at school he came every single Wednesday night and played for them. He lives and breathes it. That's what we need...someone who has it in their heart. It really is important to get someone who's not going to walk away from it. If I go away to the army and there's someone still here to play for ceili dancing, then I've done my job, you know. There's an Irish fiddler here.⁴⁰

Since apprenticing to Niall Gannon, Krone has continued to play for dance lessons and ceilis in addition to performing regularly at McNulty's Pub with Larry McNally. And he recently donated a fiddle he made through a second apprenticeship with violin maker Geoff Seitz to St. Louis Irish Arts, to be used by their fiddle students.

St. Louis Irish Arts students meet once a week for four hours every Tuesday evening at the Gardenville Community Center, during which time they receive both dance and music lessons. They perform at the monthly ceilis given at the White House, which offers an informal, family atmosphere in



Patrick Gannon and apprentices Meg Shannon and Katie Mallon perform sean-nós songs in Gaelic at the Missouri Heritage Fair, May, 1993. Photograph by David Whitman.



Irish dance contestants in curlers get a bite to eat at a nearby Wendy's while awaiting their turns before the judge at the February, 1994 Feis (Irish dance competition) in St. Louis. Ringlets are popular hair styles for female step dancers.

which to enjoy Irish music and dance. And finally the students are encouraged to participate in the midwest dance and music competitions.

St. Louis Irish Arts sponsored its seventh annual winter Feis Cheoil agus Rince (Music and Dance Competition), as well as the United States Midwest Fleadh Cheoil (Music Competition), which was held in St. Louis for the first time in May, 1994. First and second place winners in the various categories are eligible to go to Ireland to compete in the world championship in August. St. Louis Irish Arts students received numerous first and second awards at the Fleadh Cheoil this year, including Niall Gannon's current fiddle apprentice Kevin Buckley and Patrick Gannon's sean-nós apprentice Meg Shannon. Patrick Gannon reflects on the value of bringing American students to Ireland to compete with Irish dancers and musicians:

Several of our group have gone and made the pilgrimage to Ireland in August, and then they see the culture there in its purely natural form. They come back and their whole outlook is changed. I often say that you could go into a pub there and strike up a conversation and they'll say, "Who are you and where are you from?" Supposing you said, "I'm a U.S. Senator, I'm a multi-millionaire with thousands of acres in Texas, but I can't sing or I can't do much talking or I can't play anything," they'll go

on and find someone else to converse with. "Thank you, it's good seein' you, but you're not too much good to me!" And you're talkin' to somebody who may be livin' on the dole, but he's the best singer in the country! And you look up to him with awe.⁴¹

As important as the competitions are in spurring on the young dancers and musicians to attain a higher standard, Larry McNally and the Gannons remain ambiguous about their impact. McNally states point blank, "There is no king in Irish

music. One person can't judge another. I know it has to be done for the encouragement but I would not sit down and do it." Niall — who won many competitions when he was younger — now refuses to enter them, preferring to play for sessions, dances, and social gatherings. Helen wonders if the competitions have pushed Irish dance to a point where it is no longer part of an integral whole including live music. She describes one of the recent American stars of Irish step dance:

There's a young man in Chicago who has done, oh my gosh, he's done so much for Irish dancing in terms of excitement. And he performs with his dancers... *with the tape recorder!* And he said that *all feisanna* (which are competitions) should have tape recorders, and then you don't have to deal with the musicians. And if we do that we might as well give up entirely! You wouldn't have to pay them is his other thing! And he has like thirty thousand dollars in sets and lights! I mean...! And maybe that's sour grapes comin' out of me, but it was never meant to be *that way!*⁴²

On the other hand, she has nothing but praise for National Heritage Award winner Michael Flatley, who was the first American born child to win the world championship in Irish step dance:

Mike Flatley — he's a legend in his time.



(Left to right) Greg Krone and Larry McNally playing a hornpipe at McNulty's Pub in St. Louis, May, 1994.

He won the world in the music as well, on the flute. He *never* danced to tape recorded music. He was *very* much into the music and his family were very much into the music. I'm a big fan of Mike Flatley, I think he's what you'd call givin' back to the community. He would work with people like me. He worked in my basement with me to give me steps. He never felt he was above the basic steps.⁴³

Apart from teaching, musicians and dancers with St. Louis Irish Arts frequently perform both in and out of St. Louis. The Traditional Apprenticeship's sister program, Missouri Performing Traditions, sends them across the state to introduce Irish traditional music, dance, and storytelling to audiences as far apart as Van Buren in the Ozarks and the northeastern town of Athens, Missouri.

McNulty's and McGurk's pubs in St. Louis also offer opportunities for aficionados and the general public to hear live Irish traditional music. Larry McNally regularly plays button box accordion at McNulty's with Greg Krone on fiddle and alternating singers Tommy McAvoy and Nancy Lipencott. John D. McGurk's Pub, which opened in 1979, has become one of the most highly respected venues for traditional Irish music in the United States. The owner of McGurk's, Nick Carter, has devoted his bar to presenting the best of today's Irish traditional musicians. Larry McNally praises him highly:

The owner of that place, he's a tremendous man for Irish music. He forgot more Irish music than half the Irish will ever learn! And it's pure Irish music that's played down there all the time, every night of the week. McGurk's is the best Irish bar in the United States of America!⁴⁴

Such renowned groups as De Danaan and musicians as Joe Burke, Paddy O'Brien, and Martin Hayes, among others, travel to St. Louis regularly to play at McGurk's. And the growing community of Irish music lovers also gather there for special tributes, such as a recent benefit in honor of the great accordion player Jackie Daly, who suffered a brain hemorrhage. The event raised money to help pay for his medical bills.

Irish step dance is flourishing locally even more than the music. There are three active Irish dance schools in the city, in addition to St. Louis Irish Arts: Clarkson, Ryan, and Lavin-Cassidy. Of all four schools, St. Louis Irish Arts is the only one that teaches Irish music as well as dance. Niall Gannon observes:

Dancing never will have a fear of dying out, especially in this town. They're crazy for it. In the music, we have a little bit harder of a thing, you know.⁴⁵

ing on of the tradition isn't going to happen in the pub setting. You're never going to pass that stuff on to the kids and if those musicians die off there won't be anyone in St. Louis who'll really have benefited outside of just enjoying the music.⁴⁷

This determination to teach Irish music and dance as an integrated whole, coupled with the commitment to offer home sessions and informal monthly ceilis as an alternative to competitions and the bar scene, distinguishes St. Louis Irish Arts



A nice mix of ages characterizes the audiences at St. Louis Irish Arts' monthly ceilis. After a meal of corned beef and cabbage the audience is treated to a lively performance by the instructors and students alike. March, 1994.

While Irish music is definitely on the rise in the United States — a fact illustrated by the proliferation of Irish musicians across the country in concerts, bars, folklife festivals, and among the National Heritage Awardees⁴⁶ — the Gannons fear that few adult musicians are passing it down to the youth. At the recent Fleadh Cheoil in St. Louis, Helen Gannon noted that there were a large number of adult musicians from Chicago, for example, but few young ones. Niall comments:

McGurk's is known around the world in the Irish music circle, it really is. There's nowhere like it. We're thrilled to death when some of the musicians from McGurk's will come out to our ceili where we have the old people and the kids, and they can hear the music. Because the pass-

from other Irish dance academies both locally and nationally. Perhaps, as Larry McNally says, "You'll never get Ireland in America," but you can't fault St. Louis Irish Arts for trying.

All photographs by Dana Everts-Boehm unless otherwise noted.

Notes

¹Clark, Dennis, *Hibernia America: The Irish and Regional Cultures* (New York, Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press) 1986: 5-6

²Interview with Larry McNally, St. Louis, May 11, 1994.

³Towey, Martin G., "Kerry Patch Revisited: Irish Americans in St. Louis in the Turn of the Century Era," in *From Paddy to Studs: Irish-American Communities in the Turn of the Century Era*, edited by Timothy J. Meagher (New York,

Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1986): 141. See also: Francis X. Stephens, "The Mullans of St. Louis," in *Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*, Vol. XXIX (New York, New York: The American Irish Historical Society, 1931), 173-183

⁴Towey, op. cit.: 142

⁵Meagher, op. cit.: 8

⁶Interview with McNally, op. cit.

⁷Interview #2 with Niall Gannon, St. Louis, February 22, 1994.

⁸Clark, op. cit.: 50

⁹Meade, Don, "From Shore to Shore: Unique Video on Irish Traditional Music in New York," in Treoir (Monkstown, Ireland: Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann, Vol. 26, Number 1, 1994), 11-12

¹⁰Hayes, John, "The Irish American Heritage Jig," videotape (St. Louis: LaCledé Communications, 1988).

¹¹Cowdery, James R., *The Melodic Tradition of Ireland* (Kent, Ohio, and London: The Kent State University Press, 1990), 7

¹²Interview #1 with Niall Gannon, St. Louis, December 15, 1990.

¹³Cowdery, op. cit.: 22

¹⁴O Duilearga, Seámus, introduction to Seán O Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1970, reprint from 1942), v.

¹⁵Interview #1 with Patrick Gannon, St. Louis, March 20, 1994.

¹⁶Interview #2 with Patrick Gannon, St. Louis, May 11, 1994

¹⁷Interview #2 with Patrick Gannon, op. cit.

¹⁸Cowdery, op. cit.: 23

¹⁹Interview #1 with Niall Gannon, op. cit.

²⁰Cowdery, op. cit.: 79

²¹Interview #2 with Patrick Gannon, op. cit.

²²Ibid

²³Cowdery, op. cit.: 8-9

²⁴Interview #2 with Patrick Gannon, op. cit.

²⁵Interview with Larry McNally, op. cit.

²⁶Ibid

²⁷Interview #2 with Patrick Gannon, op. cit.

²⁸Interview #1 with Helen Gannon, February 22, 1994

²⁹Interview with Larry McNally, op. cit.

³⁰Interview #2 with Patrick Gannon, op. cit.

³¹Interview #1 with Helen Gannon, op. cit.

³²Ibid

³³Ibid

³⁴Interview with Eileen Gannon, St. Louis, 2/22/1994

³⁵Interview #1 with Helen Gannon, op. cit.

³⁶Interview #2 with Niall Gannon, op. cit.

³⁷Interview #1 with Helen Gannon, op. cit.

³⁸Interview #1 with Niall Gannon, op. cit.

³⁹Interview #2 with Patrick Gannon, op. cit.

⁴⁰Interview #1 with Niall Gannon, op. cit.

⁴¹Interview #2 with Patrick Gannon, op. cit.

⁴²Interview #2 with Helen Gannon, op. cit.

⁴³Ibid

⁴⁴Interview with Larry McNally, op. cit.

⁴⁵Interview #2 with Niall Gannon, op. cit.

⁴⁶See, for example, Steve Siporin, *American Folk Masters: The National Heritage Fellows* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1992): 36-7, 53-4, 199, 227, 229, 238, 242, 248 for information on Irish American folk artists who have received the National Heritage Award. These include: Sean-nós singer Joe Heaney, step dancer Michael Flatley, fiddler Martin Mulvihill, uilleann piper Joe Shannon, and flutist Jack Coen.

⁴⁷Interview #2 with Niall Gannon, op. cit.

MISSOURI MASTERS AND THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTS

"The Masters and Their Traditional Arts" is a series of brochures written by experts in Missouri's folk arts in association with Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. This brochure was written by Dana Everts-Boehm, with editing assistance from Morteza Sajadian. It is based on a design by Spencer Galloway for the series.

The Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program

Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program was initiated in 1984 with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts Folk Arts Program and the Missouri Arts Council, and run through the Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri. With the closing of the Cultural Heritage Center in 1993, the Apprenticeship Program has found a new home with the Missouri Folk Arts Program, which is administered by the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

The object of the Apprenticeship Program is to document the state's most active and talented tradition bearers and encourage them to pass their skills on to aspiring apprentices. To date the program has funded a total of ninety-four masters to teach two hundred and thirteen apprentices. The cultural and regional heritage of the state is thus recognized, honored and conserved for future generations.

Master folk artists generally learn their skills informally, through observation or imitation, rather than from books or institutional training. Their apprentices are most often members of the same ethnic, regional, occupational or religious community as the master. The art that they learn — whether it be tating, Ozark johnboat construction, Irish button box accordion, African American gospel singing, or Lao weaving, is deeply embedded in its community's history and daily life.

Program staff conducts fieldwork to find folk artists throughout the state, documenting their work with camera and tape recorder, and encouraging them to apply to the program once they have found an apprentice. When the year's batch of application are in, a panel of experts reviews them and selects the most promising. Priority is given to apprentices and masters who share the same cultural heritage as the art form; and to living art forms with few active practitioners in the area.

Once they have been selected, teams of master and apprentice work closely together for a period of nine to ten months, during which they accomplish specific goals. Apprentices often continue to work with their masters long after the program has officially ended. The Traditional Arts Apprenticeships thus function to promote cultural conservation of the state's folk arts and folklife.

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