

--And He Wasn't An Irishman

By CHRIS O'SHEAROUSE

Sentinel Staff

"St. Patrick was not Irish." Had anyone but a native son of the Emerald Isle said this there might have been room for doubt, but here was The Rev. Stephen McNicholas, 31, of St. John Vianney Catholic Church, 6200 S. Orange Blossom Trail, refreshing my Irish history.

"ST. PATRICK was a Welshman," he said, and he began to tell in a lilting brogue how March 17, the feast day of the patron saint of Ireland was kept in his childhood when he lived in the town of Cobh, on an island in Cork Harbor.

The day was spent much like July 4th or Thanksgiving, with festivals and musical stage presentations of poetry, harp music and football. American football is a combination of English rugby and Irish football, said Father McNicholas.

Also it is a day for games, bowling — seeing who can roll a 28-ounce ball the farthest down a country road — usually for stakes, and for track meets, cycling, tugs of war, sack races, obstacle races.

HE DISAPPEARED into a closet and retrieved an old battered bent paddle that looked a little like a hockey stick — "this is a hurley stick," he said, "and sure that's the fastest outdoor sport around, with 15 men on a team, and a ball the size of a softball."

IT'S A DAY for political speeches, and for drowning the shamrock — no doubt with a pint or two of stout — and for dressing up in your best green attire, and parades with marching green — kilted bands playing bagpipes, and for dancing jigs and reels. The morning is more or less religious, said McNicholas, with the frivolity beginning in the afternoon after the traditional feast of corned beef and cabbage, and boiled Irish potatoes.

McNicholas is a short, bespectacled priest who left home at 16 and went to a minor seminary, and later studied in Rome, joining an Italian order of priests, the Instituto della Carita.

"And to top it off, I was assigned to America — coming to Illinois in 1961 and to Orlando in fall of 1966 — in a parish named after a French saint, St. John Vianney."

McNICHOLAS admits he would like to be back in the old country for St. Patrick's Day, but what Irishman wouldn't.

He spoke of the countryside around Cobh, where as a child he and his playmates would dive off the side of rocks into the bay, hunt rabbits and wild ducks, deep sea fish, and "course," which is hunting with



FATHER STEPHEN McNICHOLAS ... Recalls his Ireland on St. Patrick's Day

greyhounds.

He told of the otters that abounded near the shore, how the youngsters would place cinders in their Wellington boots — waders — so when the otters would chase and bite them they would not break a bone, and of the basking sharks, which, as the name implies, sunbathe atop the water, and the whiting, perch, salmon that swim thereabouts. And, he crinkled his laughing eyes and gave an unmistakably Hibernian smile, the leprechauns — "I never saw one but I always wanted to," he joshed.

"THE STORY has it," said Mc Nicholas, "Ireland is the first place that God made and he'll remember to bless it."

McNicholas, with a tiny green harp pinned to his cassock and a bunch of shamrocks in his hand, bade me goodbye in Gaelic. "Dia is Murie agat is Padraig" — meaning, may God, Mary and Patrick be with you.

