

PEOPLE & PLACES

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GETTING THEIR IRISH UP

Emerald Isle's charm is toast of County Cobb

By Wendy Parker
Staff writer

While interest in Irish culture in metro Atlanta appears to have increased in recent years because of the steady influx of people from other parts of the country, the rich traditions of the Emerald Isle have been celebrated locally since before the Civil War.

More than 100 years ago, the Rev. Thomas O'Reilly became a local hero, threatening to excommunicate Roman Catholic soldiers in the Union Army if Gen. William T. Sherman did not spare churches, schools, hospitals and the state Capitol during the 1864 siege of Atlanta.

In Cobb County, St. Patrick's Day has come to mean more than drinking green beer and singing Irish folk songs. Growth in local Irish-oriented organizations has prompted a demand for more cultural offerings and a better understanding of the religious principles on which the holiday is observed.

On Saturday, Irish descendants in Cobb will join in the St. Patrick's Day parade in downtown Atlanta.

"People are coming in here who are interested in their heritage and want to know more about it," said east Cobb resident Frank Mulligan, who with his wife, Alice, owns The Celtic Connection, an Irish-Scottish import boutique on the Marietta Square.

The Mulligans' shop and an Irish-Scottish dance school that bears their name have become focal points of the local Irish community.

After moving to Cobb 17 years ago from upstate New York, the Mulligans found few social outlets for their children with an Irish twist. That was especially important for Mrs. Mulligan. "My father never went to Ireland, but he told all the Irish stories," she said. "It's heritage."

Because of the discrimination against Irish immigrants in the early 20th century, Mr. Mulligan said, his parents encouraged him and his siblings to blend in with American culture.



Joe McTyre/Staff

Square dance: Eileen Evans (left), who runs the Mulligan School of Dance, and sister Alice

Marie Mulligan do an Irish dance in the Marietta Square, near their family's import shop.



Joe McTyre/Staff

The littlest elf: Eileen Evans outfits son Bradley for St. Patrick's Day. Interest in Irish culture is great, says Frank Mulligan, owner of The Celtic Connection.



Joe McTyre/Staff

A true Dubliner: The Rev. Richard Brennan of St. Catherine's Catholic Church in Kennesaw is interested in the fascination with his homeland.

The Mulligans became involved in the Hibernian Benevolent Society of Atlanta, which promotes Irish culture, and later started the Mulligan School of Irish dance. He didn't try to change the Irish. He didn't Dance. Their daughter Eileen Evans runs the school and travels

around the metro area to give lessons. "We're trying to move the culture along by passing it on," Ms. Evans said. "But not all of my students are Irish."

The Rev. Richard Brennan of St. Catherine's Catholic Church in Kennesaw has been watching the American version of St. Pat-

rick's Day with a special fascination. After moving to the United States two years ago from Ireland, the 29-year-old priest has been intrigued by how Americans celebrate the holiday.

"It seems everybody wants to be Irish on St. Patrick's Day," he said.

St. Patrick was born an Englishman, studied religion in Rome and was made the bishop of Ireland in the fifth century. He found that the Celts, who followed druidic faiths, already had developed certain religious values that made it easy for them to convert to Christianity.

St. Patrick, or "Naiomh Padraig" in the old Celtic tongue, is revered in Ireland for permitting the Celts to merge druidic and Christian beliefs, a tolerance that caused him problems with the Catholic hierarchy.

"There was a sympathy for the native religion in Ireland," said the Rev. Brennan, who hails from Dublin. "That was a probability to make us little Romans."

Rome finally recognized the

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Richard Brennan
Irish priest in Kennesaw

unique blend of religions in Ireland in 1870, and St. Patrick's Day has been a big holiday ever since.

St. Patrick's celebrants of cultural and religious origins have carefully tried to steer clear of the political unrest that has rocked Northern Ireland in the 20th century.

The Hibernian Society, for example, strictly forbids any expression of political feelings during its meetings or events.

Political discussions also are off-limits with the Mulligan family, especially at their store and dance school. "We have political feelings, but we don't talk about them," Mr. Mulligan said. "It's sad what's going on over there."