

Dance Halls Of Irish New York

BY JOHN T. RIDGE

In the *New York Illustrated News* edition of February 11, 1860 there appeared a number of pictures illustrating slum life in New York, many featuring simian-faced Irish living in the most degraded conditions. There is one notable illustration of a dance hall, really nothing more than a low-class dive that depicts dancers doing a wild jig. While the crowd of participants indicates several ethnic backgrounds, it is significant that it is Ireland's most representative dance

that is depicted as the musical background for the lowest strata of New York life. For many Protestant clergymen the dance hall was the place where drunkenness and immorality mixed, and where both needed to be prohibited. The immigrants, especially the Irish, brought a long and powerful tradition of folk-dancing which many Americans found

both alien and verging on debauchery. While the general public was unwilling to go that far, public dance halls were considered places that upstanding people did not frequent. Public dancing in many cases was found on the periphery of ordinary life – at beach resorts like Coney Island or commercial picnic grounds isolated by trees and distant from the center of the city.¹

Nineteenth-century newspaper accounts of Irish social activities, however, frequently mention dancing. Almost all Irish organizations regularly sponsored dances and more elaborate balls during the course of a year, and no picnic or excursion would have been complete without a

musical element. Country dancing, traditional jigs, reels, and set dances seemed to predominate at Irish events—but ballroom dancing, waltzes, and two-steps were also featured, usually in separate halls. As a general rule it seems the closer the immigrant was to the time of immigration, the stronger was the traditional musical taste.

REACTIONS AMONG THE RELIGIOUS

Among the Protestant denominations the

fiercest opposition to dancing came in the Methodist communion. The Rev. Dr. Van Alstyne of the Sands Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church of Brooklyn Heights made comments about dancing typical of the time in 1894: "I thoroughly condemn the whole thing, because it endangers the morals of society, especially those of the young people. I



believe that there is abundant proof of the remark made by an eminent Catholic prelate, that 90 per cent of the young women who fall do so through sin first imbibed in the ballroom."²

At the third Plenary Council of the Roman Catholic Bishops in 1886, the only official statement on the part of the Catholic Church in America came in a single paragraph relating to "round" dancing. In a pastoral letter issued by the council it stated: "We consider it to be our duty to warn our people against those amusements which may easily become to them an occasion of sin, especially against those fashionable dances

Illustration:

Mike Donovan in 1906 started one of the early dance halls. He frequently featured special events like a masquerade ball in 1916. From the John T. Ridge Collection.

John Ridge is a former president of the New York Irish History Roundtable and currently serves as its vice president for local history. He is the author of several books and many articles on the Irish in the New York City area. A frequent speaker and lecturer, he is also a regular contributor to New York Irish History. ©2006. Published with permission of John T. Ridge.

CONCERT
And
DANCE
At **DUFFY'S HALL**
Third Avenue, at 114th Street
THURSDAY NIGHT,
MAY 30th
(Decoration Day Night)
Positively New York's Greatest
Irish Night
The Emerald Isle Band and
The Hollywood Ramblers
Continuous Music
Continuous Dancing
ADMISSION FIFTY CENTS

MATTIE HASKINS.

PEARL McAULEY.

MCCORMACK SISTERS.

Illustration:
Duffy's Hall featured several special performers in 1929, including Dublin singer Mattie Haskins who later began one the New York's best-known Irish import stores. From the John T. Ridge Collection.

which, as at present carried on, are revolting to every feeling of delicacy and propriety, and are fraught with the greatest danger to morals.”³

Roman Catholic clergy largely had a tolerant attitude towards dancing. Most parishes frequently hosted dances in their parish halls or at their annual picnics where pastors and clergy were commonly in attendance. These functions were carefully supervised, and nothing untoward would, of course, be allowed to take place. For Irish-born Rev. James H. McGean, pastor of St. Peter's Church in Barclay Street, it was a question of whether individual dances were proper or improper. Father McGean put it simply: “If you saw a dance in which you would not like to have your sister to participate in, that dance would be improper.”⁴

WHEN NOT TO DANCE

Halls that offered dancing as a commercial enter-

prise were in a separate category than church or social organization sponsoring dances. Many taverns all over the city had a back room where dancing took place on weekend nights and occasionally weekdays as well. Enforcement of laws restricting dancing on Sundays was often not done, but periodic crackdowns raised the issue of public dancing to the forefront. One neighborhood, a district known as “Little Coney Island,” located in the vicinity of West 110 Street between Amsterdam and Broadway was full of small dance halls which frequently offered dancing on Sundays in violation of the blue laws. The local Riverside Drive and Morningside Heights Association, a group apparently of the more wealthy citizens of the neighborhood, objected to the popular lower class entertainment establishments and forced the police to act against the Waldron brothers' dance hall at 216 West 110 Street. They were issued warnings in January, 1901 to cease their Sunday dancing. The Waldrons attempted to get around the ban by announcing a

dance under the auspices of the Robert Emmet Social Club, a ruse designed to put the auspices of the dance in the name of an Irish social club. The police, however, acted to stop the dance, and a few minutes before midnight on St. Patrick's Day a squad arrived to find more than four-hundred patrons present. Initially, one of the Waldrons vowed to continue the dance to make a test case out of it, but on hearing the commanding police captain that he would arrest “the first person that waltzes a step” backed down and closed up for the night.⁵

Two weeks later the police again showed up at Waldrons' dance hall on Sunday evening. The patrons sat calmly as the police stationed themselves around the hall and waited until one individual described as an “old man” suddenly shouted “I know my rights and I'm going to dance.” Urged on by the crowd the “old man,”

forty-two year old Frank Campbell, took four steps of a waltz without the accompaniment of either music or a partner and was promptly arrested. A young couple defiantly followed and was likewise arrested. The police captain then arrested Louis Waldron on the charge of "aiding, allowing and abetting dancing in disregard of the Sunday laws."⁶

Although several other owners of halls were arrested like Waldron, including the owner of Schwaben Hall, a large German hall in Bushwick, at around the same time, it was Waldron who became a symbol for the whole fight against dance hall restrictions. In the next two months he was raided thirteen times, but in court he won a complete victory in police court and in the state supreme court. Another ruse to avoid prosecution under the law was to serve food anytime a customer ordered an alcoholic drink. This allowed them to sidestep the law by claiming they were a restaurant. By June Waldron was taking the counteroffensive against Police Commissioner Murphy filing charges filed against him for "oppression" and demanding his removal in appeals to the New York State Governor.⁷

WRONG AND RIGHT DANCES

A glance through any of the weekly Irish news-

papers of the time (*Irish American, Irish World, Gaelic American, Irish Advocate*) would reveal that small dance halls had already proliferated in Irish neighborhoods around the city. A high-brow committee called the Committee for Amusement Resources for Working Girls was influential in getting passed the Dance Hall License Act of 1910. Its major provision set up a regulatory agency to inspect the halls for fire and safety purposes before a license in exchange for a fee of \$50 could be obtained. The fee effectively eliminated most of the small room back room halls. The Committee for Amusement Resources for Working Girls had a larger agenda. It hoped a series of model halls under its auspices would dominate the city and introduce high-class social dancing. The committee chairwomen, Mrs. Charles H. Israel, saw ethnic dancing as part of the problem:

"There is too much attention given to folk dancing, and practically none to the social dances. These little girls cannot do the tarantella and the Irish reel at a dance hall. And because they have not been taught the waltz or the two-step and the adaptations of these dances, they have to dance the easiest thing they can – the turkey trot and its popular companions. Nine out of ten girls

Illustration:

Brooklyn had a number of Irish dance halls including the Harp of Erin in 1932. Most Irish neighborhoods throughout the city had at least one hall catering to neighborhood clientele. From the John T. Ridge Collection.

Brooklyn's Greatest Sensation!

Three Big Free Nights, Saturday, Sunday and Thursday, Oct. 8, 9, 13, at the Grand Opening of

HARP OF ERIN BALLROOMS

Formerly Koch's Hall, 1252 Bedford Ave., Brooklyn, Between Jefferson Avenue and Fulton Street

American Music by Bill Mealy's Radio Orchestra
Irish Music by James O'Donnell and His Harp of Erin Orchestra
Continuous Dancing Every Thursday, Saturday and Sunday Night

Floor Managers—Anthony O'Donnell and Patrick Roarty
Management—Willie Brennan and Con Boyle

CHOICE DATES OPEN AT REASONABLE PRICES
BALLROOMS NEWLY DESIGNED AND RENOVATED

are dancing vulgar dances because they don't know any others."⁸

The biggest offender of all the modern

remove any competition to the commercial dance halls, especially the Irish halls, and this undoubtedly gave them a boost that propelled the proliferation of halls in the next few years. Although the

Illustration:

Galway Hall was one of several Irish halls that made 125th Street in Manhattan a center for Irish entertainment in 1930. From the John T. Ridge Collection.

dances was the tango, the product of the notorious “bawdy” houses of Buenos Aires. New York’s Roman Catholic Cardinal Farley in 1913 became so incensed over its widespread introduction into the dance scene that he ordered that the annual dance of the Ladies Auxiliary of St. Vincent’s Hospital exclude any dancing at all. This action left the perplexed committee with the problem of just how they would raise the usual \$5,000 in a substitute event.⁹

Rome followed with other pronouncements against modern dances like the tango in the following year and finally in 1916 issued a guideline as to what churches around the world should do. Cardinal Farley consequently issued a total ban on any church sponsored events that included dancing. His decree read in part:

“With a knowledge of the subversion of spiritual life by these dances of today, we desire that our pastors, secular and regular, will obey in minutest detail the terms of the decree. Not only are they are forbidden to promote and foster balls, but they are likewise forbidden to be present at dances conducted even under lay auspices.”¹⁰

The immediate effect of the edict was to

decree was eventually allowed to expire, parish dances had a slow recovery as dancing once again became more acceptable to the hierarchy. In the early twenties reformers like the Women’s City Club made a last attempt to restrict modern dances and regulate the dance hall scene, but in the face of the growing popularity of both their efforts were largely unsuccessful.¹¹

THE IRISH SCENE

Before World War I the number of Irish organizations in New York City was extraordinary. Societies that were largely neighborhood based like the Ancient Order of Hibernian branches were located in each of the Irish areas and in many cases worked closely with their local Catholic parishes. Numerous other fraternal and Irish political groups, like the Irish National Foresters or the *Clan na Gael*, dotted the city. Their numbers were matched by a variety of purely social groups whose purpose was little more than promoting a good Irish style evening out. All these societies had a cross-section of the Irish community in its membership and social circle. Their members ranged from the Irish born, both old timers and the very recent, to American-born offspring, some of them with

roots stretching back over several generations. In contrast to these societies a concentration of newly arrived immigrants was to be found in the various Irish county associations and the several hundred local societies representing Irish towns and villages or regions. This latter category was especially large in Manhattan where the recent arrivals tended to find their first residences.

The newly arrived immigrants were very anxious to keep in touch with familiar surroundings and old friends and neighbors in the big city. Nothing gave them that feeling of home like the gatherings of the county, local and regional societies that numbered in the hundreds before the Great War. Because of the sheer number of these societies several local commercial halls of the city had a full calendar of events for each weekend night from hall rentals from Irish societies that did all the work for them of bringing crowds to their establishments. Every week the Irish weekly newspapers of the city carried dozens of ads for Irish dancing sponsored by an Irish society at one of the large halls that had been rented for the evening. Occasionally though, on an off night or mid-week, the halls themselves ran their own Irish dances by hiring prominent musicians from the Irish community. They often got regulars to form committees to help advertise these special nights in exchange for some small consideration. Sometimes an individual or group of individuals leased out one of the big halls for a year or more and then acted to rent out the hall to others for one-night events.

Smaller halls that could hold only a few hundred people at most organized their own Irish dances more frequently than the big halls which could hold more than a thousand people. The small halls were often owned by Irish immigrants

who managed to command a large enough neighborhood or old country following to fill their premises week after week. Whereas a big hall that was half empty was a real detriment for social success, a smaller more convivial hall could convey the necessary image of popularity with little more than walk-ins from the neighborhood.

But it was, nevertheless, only the big dance halls like the Central Opera House, East Sixty-seventh and Third Avenue, the Imperial Lyceum, East Fifty-fifth and Third Avenue and Donovan's Hall, West Fifty-ninth Street and Columbus Circle who could meet the demand of the Irish societies whose dances continually drew more than a thousand people.

Typical of the pre-war small Irish halls was one owned by Tom and Jim Tighe, two brothers from Drumshanbo, County Leitrim, located at Ninety-eighth Street and Third Avenue. The brothers, who first opened in 1906, offered their hall free for meetings of the numerous Leitrim village and town organizations in the city

and quickly established a loyal clientele. One fund-raising committee meeting there to raise money for a new church in the old country issued an appeal

“to the sons and daughters of County Leitrim, and in particular those of the Parish of Gortletteragh to help to lift up their native county and parish and to free their religion from the bondage of Mammon and to restore her to that liberty which with Christ, hath made her free.”

Strident calls to local and county patriotism

Illustration:

The dance halls competed against one another by bringing in special shows, like the popular McNulty Family that appeared in Mayo Ballrooms in 1934. From the John T. Ridge Collection.

as if the very existence of the immigrant's former homesteads were at stake became characteristic of such efforts.¹²

The Leitrim Social Club brought their dancing class to host a regular evening of traditional dance every Sunday night at Tighe's Hall. Several other dancing classes with Irish county names met at different small halls in Manhattan and made each of these locations the recognized gathering place for their respective immigrants. Like county football clubs the county dancing clubs competed against one another for honors at some of the bigger halls like Donovan's. County dancing clubs and county Gaelic teams created a local consciousness not previously evident among New York's Irish and led ultimately to the proliferation of halls with county names and followings in the 1920s and 1930s.¹³

Donovan's Hall, located at Columbus Circle, is credited with being the first large Irish dance hall in the city. Mike Donovan, a native of County Waterford, opened his hall around 1906,

only Irish girl successfully conducting a dancing school... in New York. Francis X. Hennessey, more popularly known as a uileann piper, conducted another school coaxing potential customers with the slogan "Don't be a Wall Flower." The dancing schools filled an important need for many country immigrants who were unfamiliar with even basic ballroom dances like the waltz and two-step.¹⁵

DECLINE AND REVIVAL

The key factor limiting the success of a strictly commercial Irish dance hall which ran its own dances independently of any help from Irish societies was the number of new Irish immigrants in the city. Immigration from Ireland had been slowing down in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century and was almost completely cut off by World War I. It did not resume in large numbers until the early 1920s when for a time about thirty thousand immigrants a year arrived. The Depression again brought the flow of Irish

Illustration:

Francis X. Hennessey in 1935 was a dance teacher and an accomplished musician on the uileann pipes. He performed in many of the city's Irish dance halls. From the John T. Ridge Collection.

LEARN TO DANCE

The Cyrilla Studio of Modern Dance

417 WEST 56th ST. (near 9th Ave. "L")



I don't care what age you are, old or young (no exceptions). Will positively guarantee to teach you to dance, waltz and two-step for \$10.00 (ten private lessons), OR RETURN YOUR MONEY. NO FAILURES. All lessons private (no class lessons) and given personally by

FRANCIS X. HENNESSY

NEW YORK DANCING MASTER

P. S. — I specialize in all Latest Dances — New York, Hesitation, Boston Glide, One Step, Etc. "Stack o' Barley," "Highland Fling," "Varsoviens Sets, Etc. Don't be a "Wall Flower".



and it became an instant success not only because of its location but because of the personality of the hall's owner. Donovan started his own dancing school on the premises and was available for personal lessons. He advertised that his school taught "more to dance than all the others combined."¹⁴ Several other Irish ran their own dance schools including Miss Katherine Smith, "the

newcomers almost to a halt after 1931, but it was this wave of immigration that created the Irish dance hall phenomenon of the 1920s and '30s.

In 1921 the dance hall scene had begun to revive somewhat after the disruption of the war. Returned soldiers, most of them still single, resumed their regular attendance at one or more of the dozen or so halls that catered to Irish musi-



cal tastes. Most of the dances were still sponsored by an Irish society, but there were already signs that a new independent commercial Irish dance hall scene was emerging. The Imperial Lyceum (also called the Fifty-fifth Street Lyceum) at East Fifty-fifth Street and Third Avenue began advertising in November regular Thursday night dances independent of any sponsorship by an Irish society under the theme “Spend a Night in Ireland.” Significantly, the hall not only offered a separate hall for Irish traditional dancing, but a separate hall featuring “modern jazz” performed by the Lyceum Jazz Band. Jazz was then very much under attack by critics in the press who found “barbarian jazz” a cause of evil in society. The public demand for jazz, however, overwhelmed whatever the social critics preached and dance halls were quick to see its appeal. The combination of Irish dance and jazz at the same hall was certainly a novelty that would have agonized some clergy and the leadership of many Irish organizations, but it continued to draw crowds to the Imperial.¹⁶

The explosion in the Irish dance hall scene took place in the 1920s and early 1930s. Dozens of small and large halls popped up in Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens, but only few of them managed to survive for a decade or more. The life span of the average hall was short and was

often accompanied by frequent name changes and relocations. Competition was fierce and the popularity of a hall shifted sometimes from week to week. A good band was always the main attraction and a full hall was an attraction in itself. A hall could easily fall in and out of fashion.

The larger Irish dance halls like Donovan’s, the Imperial Lyceum and the Central Opera House at East Sixty-seventh Street and Third Avenue were patronized by immigrants from a variety of Irish counties and regions, but some of the new halls capitalized on sectional feeling to make a mark on the Irish social scene. Sullivan’s Hall, East 101 Street and Third Avenue, as early as 1921 had strong Kerry affiliations and a glance at its calendar was full of socials for groups like the Kerry Dancing Class, the Kenmare Social Club, the North Kerry Boys and the Tarbert Social Club. Occasionally, a nearby Munster county group from adjacent Limerick or even Tipperary would hold an affair at the hall, but its principal clientele came from the famous “kingdom.”¹⁷

By 1926 there was the Mayo Dance Hall at 203 East Sixty-seventh Street near Third Avenue, a center for immigrants from that county and the New Irish Hall (also known as Engineer’s Hall) where “all Sligo, Mayo, Leitrim, Galway and Roscommon,” it was claimed, could be found. The New Irish Hall advertised that it was “the

Photo:

The Leitrim House Cabaret Band in 1938 performed six nights a week at the East Fifty-ninth Street dance hall of the same name. The hall was owned by Gaelic football star, Mike McCabe. From the John T. Ridge Collection.



Photo:
McGenera's Hall on
Third Avenue near East
Eighty-third Street fea-
tured Dan McGenera's
own orchestra in 1943.
Courtesy of the John T.
Ridge Collection.

place where you can always meet the boys and girls from home.”¹⁸ A Roscommon Ballroom appeared a few years later by 1928 about the same time Galway Hall came into operation. Duffy's Hall, 114th Street and Third Avenue, was a Mayo and Roscommon hall that *Irish Advocate* G.P. O'Grady said “never noticed much change in the attendance or the faces” from one week to the next.¹⁹ The Leitrim Ballroom in 1931 replaced the Mayo Ballroom that had operated for several years. It was under the management of Thomas Wynne who was in partnership with “young fellows drawn from the Leitrim Athletic and Football club.” The New Mayo Halls opened up that same year at 204 East Eighty-fourth Street in Yorkville. The Gap of the North Ballroom, East 105th Street and Third Avenue, was an outgrowth of a social club of the same name and was “the place for a Northerner who wants to meet the home folks.” The Gap of the North drew a crowd of immigrants from Louth, Cavan, Fermanagh, Down, Antrim and Derry.”²⁰ The New Munster Ballroom at 884 Columbus Avenue and 104 Street suddenly switched provincial allegiance in 1931 and became the West of Ireland Ballroom. This was not to be confused with the Connaught Ballroom, 315 West 125 Street. The New Riverside Halls, West 125 Street and Lenox Avenue, was the gathering place for Clare people every Saturday night when the Irish Republican

Army veterans from Clare held a regular social. The Shamrock Ballroom, West 125th Street near Eighth Avenue, had its “usual Sunday night crowd of Kerry folk” as did Ryan's Hall, 610 East 137th Street near St. Ann's Avenue which was known as a center for both Kerry and Cork people. Cork and Kerry Hall (also called the Smartset Ballroom), originally an “all American taxi dance hall” was a center for those two counties at East Sixty-eighth Street and Broadway.²¹

Other ballrooms, while appealing to all counties, sometimes were the ballrooms of choice for almost all its county and local socials. This was the case with County Monaghan and the Bronx All Ireland Ballroom, 137th Street at Third Avenue, which was located over a bank. Most Monaghan socials were held at this location, but it was by no means their exclusive meeting place. At least one hall, Tara Hall in the West Sixties was an I.R.A. veterans gathering place. Its successor, I.R.A. and *Clan na Gael* Hall (also called McGovern's Hall), 147 Columbus Avenue prided itself that in contrast to many of the other Irish dance halls it was characterized by an “absence of sectionalism or localism” and a place where all Irish from any county would be welcome.²²

FINDING A HOME

The degree of sectionalism in any of the Irish dance halls varied in intensity, but apparently it

was not hard and fast. Kerry-born *Irish Advocate* columnist C.P. O'Grady stated that although Connaught was in a majority at Galway Hall "a Kerryman will find that he can be at home there, too."²³ In any case, there were more than a dozen other halls where there was no trace of county or regional affiliation where any Irish immigrant could blend in easily.

Newly arrived immigrants were strongly drawn to other immigrants from the same locality. It was natural enough for some lonely immigrant, torn from his familiar surroundings, to try to replicate a version of something as close to home in New York. It was more commonly the "greenhorns" who sought the comfort of others from a close proximity to their place of birth, but as time went on this necessity diminished and perhaps they can be said to have become at first more Irish and then more American.

The established county societies themselves objected to the co-opting of the "county idea" by the commercial dance halls. They had enjoyed an organizational life based on the principle that their periodic socials were mini-reunions. They never sought to turn their organizations into an exclusive social network that kept them isolated from other Irish immigrants. They found the frequent advertisements for dances run as if sponsored by a genuine organization rather than by just the dance hall itself or by an anonymous group leasing the dance hall to be nothing less than the action of "racketeers." Former Galway Men's Association President Dick O'Brien addressed some of his organization objections in a letter to the *Irish Advocate* in 1931:

*"Several individuals have and are using the names of Galway for their own selfish motives. They conduct various entertainments, etc. Every cent of the proceedings finds its way into their own pockets; their only attempt to help men from Galway is to take all they can from them. Beware of those who would use the name or attempt to use the name of any part of the Galway Men's S&B Association."*²⁴

The Irish dance halls did give back to the community to some extent, mainly through

making their halls available free of charge for charity fund raising events. Benefits for sick Irish immigrants or their dependent families were very common and usually held on an off night. Church related fund-raisers were also common, appeals for a new church in some old country parish, a new parish in a rural or suburban area or occasionally for a foreign mission. Personal benefits were also run for musicians or Irish dancing schools. One dance hall, the Tri-Color Ballroom, 401 East 138th Street on the corner of Willis Avenue, regularly gave the entire proceeds of dances "to the Relief of the Unemployed." Perhaps the most popular fund raising cause was Irish freedom, particularly for Irish Republican organizations of all kinds in Ireland. This strong interest reflected the massive movement of Irish Republican exiles to New York after the consolidation of power by Free State forces in 1923.

GREAT AND GOOD LOCATIONS

Generally, the most successful dance halls were located in mid-town Manhattan, both on the East and West Side, but a number of the smaller halls dotted Third Avenue all the way to Harlem. On West 125 Street, centered on Eighth Avenue, there were almost a dozen halls—not all of them in operation at the same time, however. The South Bronx was another location for dance halls, most of them in the vicinity of East 138th Street.

Brooklyn had its own Irish dance halls, fewer in number than Manhattan, but quite happily existing without much competition from its neighbor. Koch's Hall, later known as the Harp of Erin, even in 1921 was known to be "the place where the Brooklyn Irish go on Sunday." Its main rival was Tammany Hall, distinct from the institution of the same name in Manhattan. The earliest halls, like old Gaelic American Hall, Baltic Street and Fifth Avenue, were located in neighborhoods that had already lost most of its Irish character by this time. In 1931 a new hall, the Pride of Erin, began operation at Bedford Avenue and Atlantic Avenue. It was perhaps the city's largest with thirty-thousand square feet of maple-wood dancing floor and could easily accommodate two-thousand dancers. White uniformed waiters catered to

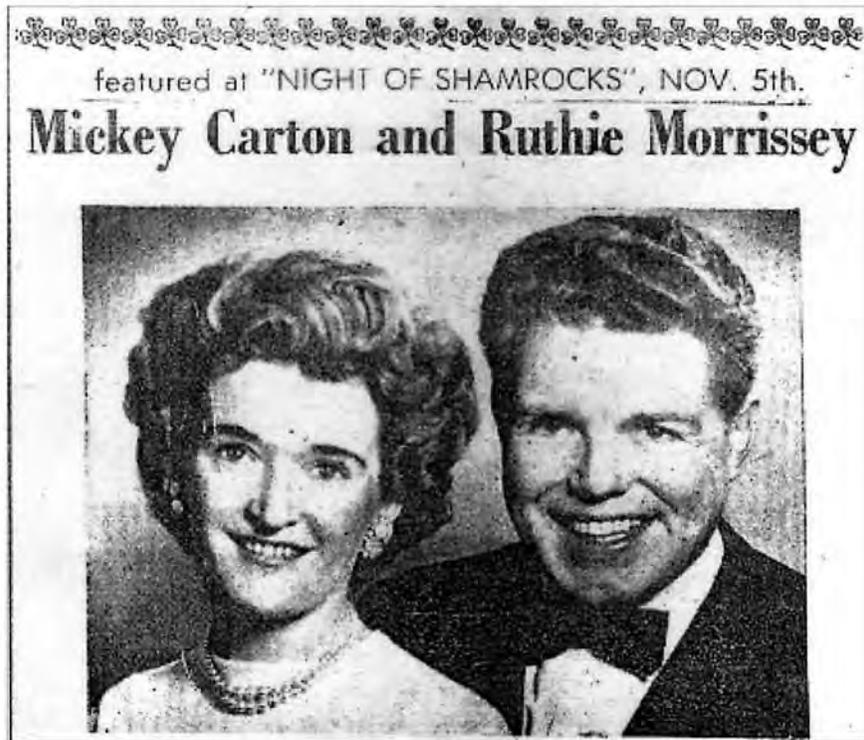


Photo:
Vocalist Ruthie Morrissey
and band leader Mickey
Carton were a popular
combination at the
Tuxedo Ballroom
and other dance halls
in 1956. From the John
T. Ridge Collection.

three-hundred tables in a refreshment room that in those final years of prohibition still served soft drinks and tea. Live broadcasts every Sunday night over two radio stations soon spread its fame beyond the "City of Churches." Other halls appeared in other parts of Brooklyn along Fifth Avenue in Bay Ridge, and for a brief time there were three halls on Flatbush Avenue south of Prospect Park as far south as central Flatbush. All of these halls had ceased functioning by 1945, although Lyon's Cabaret, Washington Avenue and Park Place, continued to offer dancing six nights a week through the 1950s.

In the summer time the Rockaway section of Queens came alive to Irish music and dance as many of the Manhattan dance halls closed for the summer and people headed for the beach. The section centering on Beach 103rd Street, known as "Irishtown," was bursting with small halls featuring Irish music. All the leading musicians from New York—Paddy Killoran, James Morrison, Peter J. Conlon, the McNulty Family, and a host of others performed in the summer months there. Elsewhere in Queens in neighborhoods like Woodside, small halls such as Murphy's Cabaret, 44-05 Queens Boulevard near the Bliss

Street subway station, offered regular Irish dancing six nights a week year round.²⁵

THE THIRTIES AND AFTER

The effects of the economic depression and the virtual cessation of Irish immigration after 1931 started to reduce the number of Irish dance halls by the late 1930s. Many of the Irish that had frequented the halls over the previous decade were now married with children and out of the dance hall scene. In 1938 a few of the big halls like Donovan's, the Innisfail Ballroom and the Roscommon-Tuxedo Ballroom, East 59th Street and Madison Avenue featured more and more Irish society sponsored events rather than open commercial dances. The New Emerald Ballroom, 438 West 125th Street, seems to have been the last Irish ballroom on that street. It advertised itself as the "only Kerry dance hall" and was popular for polkas and Kerry sets. Under Irish society auspices the ballrooms could bring in big numbers such as a dance of the Longford Young Men's Association that had 1,750 in attendance.²⁶

Just before America entered the war in 1940 the ballrooms in mid-town were enjoy-

ing their last nights before Pearl Harbor curtailed their operation entirely as dance halls featuring regularly scheduled Irish dancing. Increasingly, cabaret-type operations like the Leitrim House, at Third Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street, the Four Provinces Restaurant and Café, 1436 Third Avenue at Eighty-first Street and Kerin's Cabaret and Restaurant, 1707 Third Avenue near Ninety-sixth Street filled in the gap for those who just wanted to walk in any weekend night and find a place to dance. The Leitrim House even offered an Irish floorshow every Wednesday night and had two adjunct locations in the Bronx featuring regular dancing. A dance hall in the Bronx, the Star of Munster, 138th Street and Willis Avenue, which had begun operation in 1932 under the management of a Corkman, Moss Aherne, was not only the last of big dance halls in the Bronx offering weekend dancing, but resumed in the same capacity after the war until the late 1950s.²⁷

At the close of the war in 1945 only the smaller cabaret-style Irish dance halls were still operating. In Manhattan most of them were located on Third Avenue. The Irish societies had upgraded their venues to a large extent, moving them from the dance hall to a number of well-appointed hotel ballrooms like the Hotel Capitol, Fifty-first Street and Eighth Avenue, the Henry Hudson Hotel, 353 West Fifty-seventh Street, and the Empire Hotel, Fifty-third Street and Broadway. Of course, dances were also held at the Central Opera House and the Yorkville Casino, a long-time site of Irish dances on Eighty-sixth Street, but these were not serving as regular weekend venues for Irish dancing.²⁸

AFTER WORLD WAR II

After more than fifteen years of curtailed Irish immigration a much smaller number of Irish began to find their way to New York in the late 1940s. By 1949 many of the old dance halls began to offer weekend dancing like the Central Opera House (also known as the New Sligo Ballroom) and Tuxedo Hall, Fifty-ninth Street and Lexington Avenue. New ballrooms appeared on the scene as well. An Irish dance hall called the Irish-American Ballroom was

opened in the Hotel Peter Stuyvesant at Eighty-sixth Street and Central Park West, and the United Irish Ballroom was at 110 East Fifty-ninth Street. William P. Quinn, a columnist for the *Irish Advocate*, who was himself a musician wrote that three-hundred people had to be turned away at a Sunday night dance he was playing for in the latter hall. He added "many attended who just arrived from Ireland last week." It seemed like old times once again, but Quinn warned:

*"The way things look at the moment, Ireland may have to shape things up a little if they want to keep the young generation from seeking foreign shores. Young people want action in a modern way, which is lacking in many countries."*²⁹

For an Irish dance hall in Coney Island, always regarded as somewhat tawdry by many in the Irish community, it was almost the end of an era. The Shamrock Irish House, at Henderson Walk and the Bowery, in operation since 1937, was the successor of a long line of Irish summer time dance halls in Coney Island. Coney Island was not Rockaway though. In contrast to the dozens of summer time Irish dance halls there, Coney Island had just one or two at any given time. In 1949 the Shamrock Irish House was still offering three Irish shows nightly along with its singing waiters, but it had only a few years ahead of it before it vanished as the last Irish vestige in that resort community.³⁰

THE LAST OF THE HALLS

The five-thousand or so immigrants who came to America every year from the late 1940s to the early 1960s brought about a revival of the Irish dance hall scene. Although those who flocked to the halls during that time would think at times that all Ireland seemed to be dancing in New York, it was a pale reflection of the high point of the dance halls in the 1920s and 1930s. In some ways the immigrant who came after World War II was different—better educated, more skills, more sophisticated. One needs only to look at the ads for the dance halls to spot a subtle but very important difference to the earlier generation. The post-war dance halls advertised dancing

on “Friday, Saturday and Sunday.” Gone was the old-fashioned Thursday night dances, the “maid’s night out,” the only night during the week that many Irish domestics were allowed to themselves by their hard driving employers.

The new immigrants were not dependent on housework or cooking; they had the education which often took them into office work, book-keeping or retail work. This meant regular hours, nine to five jobs, and the opportunity to attend the dance halls three nights a week if they so chose. The men, too, were no longer just unskilled laborers. New high paying jobs began to open to them thanks to skills learned in the slowly developing new Ireland.

Three Manhattan halls became the focal point of Irish weekend entertainment—the Tuxedo Ballroom, East Eighty-sixth Street at Third Avenue, the City Center, 155 West Fifty-fifth Street and the Jaeger House, corner of East Eighty-fifth Street and Lexington Avenue. The shift out of midtown Manhattan reflected the shift in the Irish population away from the old neighborhoods on the east and west sides. Many of the old tenements that had housed immigrants were gone and new comers were now more likely to settle down in the Bronx or Queens. With two of the halls located in Yorkville it made it easier for those settled in the Bronx to reach them while at the same time they were still in Manhattan and could attract the Irish from Brooklyn and Queens. The only other large halls were located in the Bronx, the Star of Munster in the South Bronx and the Tara Ballroom located in the Bronx Theater Building on East 149 Street. The Tower View in Woodside entered the scene a little later as a major Irish dance hall. Brooklyn for the first time had no large Irish dance hall.

Because many of the immigrants from Ireland came from rural areas, there was still a great deal of interest in traditional music, but things were beginning to change. In the mid-1950s rock-n’-roll began to sweep the world and popular music became closely identified with the new music. Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s produced the “showband” phenomena—orchestras with lots of brass and beat.

What traditional music was played was often rendered in a “jazzed-up” style that annoyed some of the old generation, but was taken to heart by the young immigrants. Of course, Irish ballads could be played in waltz time and that sufficed for most people. More and more country western influence crept in as well, so the Irish dance hall was quite different from their pre-war predecessors.

The famed traditional accordionist Joe Burke recalled in an interview with Earle Hitchener that appeared in the *Irish Echo* that demand for the jigs and reels was sparse. In tours in 1961 and 1962, Burke’s appearances at City Center consisted of a brief fifteen-minute medley of the “Stack of Barley,” the “Siege of Ennis,” and a few old time waltzes. The revival of *ceili* music of recent years was yet to come, but it came too late for the Irish dance hall scene.³¹

The transatlantic airplane had made possible tours by many of Ireland’s most popular orchestras. Such groups as the Royal Showband, the Emerald Showband, the Johnny Flynn Showband and rock-n’-roll bands like the Crestwoods (also known as The Living End) brought the type of music they were enjoying in Ireland right to the New York stage. Some more traditional musicians survived like Paddy Noonan and his Band, Ruthie Morrissey, and Mickey Carton and even tenors like John Feeney. Another performer was Carmel Quinn who had won national notoriety on the Arthur Godfrey television show. Occasionally, a *ceili* band like the Tulla Ceili Band appeared as part of an American tour.

ERA’S END

Listening to advertisements for the dance halls over Dorothy Hayden’s weekly radio shows gave the impression that the halls would go on forever, but the era was to come to a sudden dramatic end. The Immigration Act of 1965 had the effect of curtailing Irish immigration to America, and by the late 1960s the numbers coming to America from Ireland had dropped to around five-hundred persons a year.

Almost in direct response the Tuxedo

Ballroom closed its doors forever in 1965. In its final year it had offered Irish-style rock on Sunday afternoons from one to four p.m., followed by a more traditional musical offering for the evening hours. The Tuxedo occupied the basement of the Yorkville Casino which had been a hall leased by Irish societies for their dances from the time it opened in 1904. Appropriately enough, the last fling for the Irish were the St. Patrick's Day Balls of the Galway and Donegal Societies.³²

Bill Fuller, owner of the City Center Ballroom, the best appointed of the three Manhattan halls, had tried valiantly to keep his dance hall going. Almost every week there was one sort of contest or another—dance contests, trips to Ireland, beauty contests and door prizes. With fewer Irish young people more and more “walk-ins,” people just wandering in off the street started, the character of the hall started to change, and there was some friction with “outsiders.” By 1967 it was turned into a sort of private club with a nominal membership of one dollar. The result was that it became for a time more intensely Irish—a kind of preserve in the midst of a changing city. By 1970, however, both the City Center and the Jaeger House were gone as Irish dance halls.

If one wanted to witness an Irish dance hall in 1970, it was necessary to visit either the Bronx or Queens, but the Tower View in Woodside was the only one large enough to resemble the halls of earlier times. For Friday night dances young men and women tended to arrive between ten and eleven o'clock, the men generally arriving alone while the women appeared in pairs or groups of four. There was never a mad dash to the dance floor, the men were always reluctant to ask the women to dance, and this caused many women to become so infuriated that when someone actually gathered enough courage to ask them, they refused them. Bill Hardigan, the Leitrim-born owner of the Tower View summarized the behavior of his young customers: “Everybody's always talking so much about the fighting Irish they don't know how shy they are with their women. Three or four times a night we'll have to announce Ladies Choice and the girls pick a man to dance with.”³³

EPILOGUE

In time even the Tower View closed leaving Irish dancing the preserve of restaurants with small dance floors. An era was over. Their demise was not always so dramatic as that of the old Imperial Lyceum at East Fifty-fifth Street, where some of the Irish who had been its patrons got to see it demolished in 1940.³⁴ The fate of other Irish dance halls often became just curiosities. The Innisfail Ballroom became a ballet academy, while the Leitrim House fell to the expansion of an adjacent movie theater. The I.R.A. Hall on Columbus Avenue lost its liquor license in 1934 and a few years later was serving as the headquarters of the Galicia Welfare League, a group supporting the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. The old Kerry stronghold of Emerald Hall on West 125th Street became the mosque of the International Muslim Society. Nearby Sligo Hall became an office of the Communist Party newspaper, the *Daily Worker* in 1949. Tara Hall, located in the Bronx Opera House, became a center for the Mambo Kings of Latin dance in the 1950s and 1960s before becoming a church, the *Templo de Renovacion Espiritual*.

A PARTIAL LIST OF IRISH DANCE HALLS

The following list is compiled from advertisements and announcements appearing in New York's weekly Irish newspapers such as the *Irish World*, the *Irish Advocate*, and the *Irish Echo* in the period from 1910 to the late 1960s. There were many halls that operated for only a short time and others that did not advertise their events at all. Consequently, it would be almost impossible to be able to compile a list of all the Irish dance halls that functioned in New York, but this list does include most of the more important locations.

Manhattan

Imperial Lyceum,
East 55th Street and 3rd Avenue

O'Boyle's Hall,
446 West 54th Street

- Sullivan's,
East 101st Street and 3rd Avenue
- Yorkville Casino,
East 86th Street near 3rd Avenue
- Tighe's Hall,
East 98th Street near 3rd Avenue
- Central Opera House,
East 67th Street and 3rd Avenue
- Curry's Hall,
229 East 47th Street
- Donovan's Hall,
308-10 West 59th Street
- Monahan's Hall,
418 West 53rd Street
- Cashel's Hall,
East 100th Street and 3rd Avenue
- Mayo Dance Hall,
203 East 67th Street
- New Irish Hall,
153 West 64th Street
- McGovern's Hall,
1382 3rd Avenue and East 79th Street
- Foley's Hall,
444 West 125th Street
- Tuxedo Ballroom,
637 Madison and East 59th Street (1926)
- Riverside Hall,
884 Columbus Avenue and East 103rd Street
- McMeel's Ballroom (Loew's Theater),
1947 Broadway and East 66th Street
- Gaiety Gardens,
East 87th Street and 3rd Avenue
- Clan na Gael*,
149 East 42nd Street
- Innisfail,
East 56th Street and 3rd Avenue
- New Riverside Hall,
306 Lenox Avenue and 125th Street
- New Leitrim Hall,
East 67th Street and 3rd Avenue
- Galway Hall,
530 West 125th Street
- Duffy's Hall,
Third Avenue and 114th Street
- Gap of the North,
East 105th and 3rd Avenue
- New Kerry Hall (Emerald Ballroom),
303 West 125th Street near 8th Avenue
- New Mayo Hall,
204 East 84th Street
- Shamrock Hall,
251 West 125th Street near 8th Avenue
- New Munster Hall,
884 Columbus Avenue and 104th Street
- Cork and Kerry Hall (Smartset),
1999 Broadway and 68th Street
- Murphy's Hall,
229 East 47th Street
- I.R.A. Halls (Banba Hall),
147 Columbus Avenue
- Tara Halls,
Columbus Avenue
- New Munster (West of Ireland) Ballroom.
- Connaught Ballroom,
315 West 125th Street
- Sligo Hall,
321 West 125th Street
- New Emerald,
438 West 125th Street
- O'Reilly Brothers Caberet,
238 East 59th Street
- Leitrim House,
997 3rd Avenue and East 59th Street
- Roscommon-Tuxedo Ballrooms,
Madison Avenue and East 59th Street
- Four Provinces,
1436 3rd Avenue and East 81st Street
- Kerin's Caberet,
1707 3rd Avenue and East 96th Street
- United Irish Ballroom,
110 East 59th Street and Lexington Avenue
- Ireland's 32,
1436 3rd Avenue and East 81st Street
- Sheehan and Morris Hall,
3221 Broadway and 126th Street
- Irish-American Ballroom (Hotel Stuyvesant),
West 86 Street and Central Park West
- City Center,
135 West 55th Street
- McGenera's,
1436 3rd Avenue and East 81 Street

The Bronx

Ryan's Dance Hall,
610 East 137th Street and St. Ann's Avenue

Tri-Color,
401 East 138th Street and Willis Avenue

All Ireland Ballroom,
East 137th Street and 3rd Avenue

Star of Munster,
East 138th and Willis Avenue

Rosaleen Ballroom,
2770 3rd Avenue and 146th Street

Tara Hall (Bronx Theater),
442 East 149th Street

Brooklyn

Harp of Erin (Koch's Hall),
1252 Bedford Avenue near Fulton Street

Tammany Hall

Pride of Erin,
1295 Bedford Avenue and Atlantic Avenue

Gaelic-American,
Baltic and 5th Avenue

Dublin Palace,
Baltic and 5th Avenue

Erin's Isle,
1188 Fulton Street and Bedford Avenue

Notes

- 1 Kouwenhoven, John A., *The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York*, New York, 1972, p. 272.
- 2 *New York Times*, February 18, 1894.
- 3 *New York Times*, February 18, 1894.
- 4 *New York Times*, February 18, 1894.
- 5 *New York Times*, January 23, 1901 and March 18, 1901.
- 6 *New York Times*, April 1, 1901.
- 7 *Brooklyn Eagle*, May 20 and June 10, 1901.
- 8 *New York Times*, November 10, 1912.
- 9 *New York Times*, November 23, 1913.
- 10 *New York Times*, June 16, 1916.
- 11 *New York Times*, September 25, 1921 and February 7, 1925.
- 12 *Irish Advocate*, September 6, 1913.
- 13 *Irish Advocate*, September 13, 1913.
- 14 *Irish Advocate*, April 2, 1910.
- 15 *Irish Advocate*, February 13, 1935.
- 16 *Irish Advocate*, November 28, 1921; see *New York Times*, September 25, 1921, "Crises in Dancing Craze."
- 17 *Irish Advocate*, January 1, 8, 15, 22, 1921; February 18 and 26, 1921.
- 18 *Irish Advocate*, April 10, 1926.
- 19 *Irish Advocate*, January 1, 1931.
- 20 *Irish Advocate*, January 10, 1931.
- 21 *Irish Advocate*, January 3, 10, 17, 24, 1931 and March 7, 14, 1931.
- 22 *Irish Advocate*, January 24, 1931.
- 23 *Irish Advocate*, January 10, 1931.
- 24 *Irish Advocate*, February 21, 1931.
- 25 *Irish Advocate*, February 10, 1945; August 8, 1945.
- 26 *Irish Advocate*, January 1, 8, 15 and 22, 1938.
- 27 *Irish Advocate*, January 6, 13, 20, 1940; March 16, 23 and 30, 1945.
- 28 *Irish Year Book*, United Irish Counties, New York, 1945.
- 29 *Irish Advocate*, January 15, 1949.
- 30 *Irish Advocate*, August 6, 1949.
- 31 *Irish Echo*, March 10-16, 2004.
- 32 *New York Times*, August 2, 1965. Advertisements in the *Irish Advocate* in 1968, however, continue to advertise dances at the Tuxedo Ballroom at this address. Perhaps the ballroom had re-located from the old upstairs quarters to the downstairs Yorkville Casino.
- 33 *New York Times*, March 11, 1970.
- 34 *New York Times*, January 9, 1940.