


# *Irish Town and Local Societies in New York*

BY JOHN T. RIDGE

IRISH AND AMERICAN DANCE  
To Be Given by  
**COOTEHILL GLEE CLUB**  
At LESLIE HALL  
83rd Street and Broadway  
**On Sunday Eve'g**  
**April 21, 1929**  
Music by  
Patrick Lynch's Orchestra  
Admission : 50 Cents



**Illustration:**

*Although there was a Coothill (Co. Cavan) Society in the 1850s, the 1929 organization had been organized only a few years before. From the John T. Ridge Collection.*

**I**n the long period of Irish settlement in New York there have been thousands of organizations formed by immigrants and their descendants for a wide variety of purposes. Most of these organizations sought members from people of Irish birth or background regardless of their Irish place of origin. But like groups among contemporary immigrants from Germany and Italy, some organizations were founded to appeal to immigrants from a specific part of their homeland. For the Irish the most frequent geographic breakdown for these societies was by county. From the middle of the 19th century New York has had an organization for each of Ireland's 32 counties, although they may not all have existed at the same time.

In addition to the county societies there have been other organizations formed to appeal to even more specific geographic entities, towns and local areas. Town and local societies appeared at virtually

the same period as county societies in New York and in the ensuing years have coexisted with the more widely known and popular county societies.

The first of the town societies in New York was the Athlone Guild of Friendship (Co. Westmeath), founded in 1850, and it served as a ground-breaker for hundreds of similar organizations which followed. The lingering attachment of immigrants to their native land extended for many right down to the smallest towns, villages, rural parishes or occasionally baronies (a now pretty much obsolete geographic area used in British administered Ireland). Indeed, for many immigrants there could be no closer feeling for home than the camaraderie experienced when surrounded by friends and neighbors from the old country.

#### ATHLONE GUILD AND OTHERS

Although the Athlone Guild of Friendship was the pioneer of Irish town and local societies, it

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was somewhat atypical. Athlone was one of the principle market towns of the midlands and economically dominated a wide region which linked together a region of some five counties—Westmeath, Roscommon, Offaly, Longford, and part of Galway. Its position on the Shannon connected it even further from east to west and consequently it formed a natural commercial and social hub in the center of Ireland. It was a business town, famed for its shops and markets, and many of those who joined the Athlone Guild of Friendship were the products of its large middle class. The Athlone social gatherings reflected this middle-class status as formal and relatively expensive dinners were the chief form of entertainment. Even more costly were its excursions by stage transport to suburban picnic groves. No rules excluded the poorer Irish, but one had to have a little means to keep up with the financial demands of its social gatherings.

The economic prosperity of the members of the Athlone Guild of Friendship did give the organization a permanency and stability that most of its poorer contemporary Irish societies did not have. Whereas Irish societies were forever coming into existence, many of them seemed to disappear almost as fast. Not so the Athlone Guild, for 32 years after its founding in 1882 it was still at the height of success as one of the oldest social and beneficial societies of the Irish in New York. At a dinner held in that year at Beethoven Hall, 210 East Fifth Street (the building is still standing today), its president John Savage, a prominent Fenian and New York Irish weekly newspaper publisher, introduced the guest of the evening, Irish M.P. Tim Healy, who was substituting for T.P. O'Connor, a leader of the Irish faction in the British Parliament. O'Connor had several times previously attended Athlone Guild socials, but on this occasion had been called away suddenly to Ireland and had to arrange for Healy to substitute. O'Connor, although not a native of the town, had resided there for several years with his wife and family.

Providing the entertainment for the Athlone Guild was Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore, America's most famous bandmaster, who had grown up in the town. Gilmore was a household name in America and as famous then as John Phillip Sousa

became a decade later. Indeed, it was only upon Gilmore's death that Sousa rose to fill the gap as America's leading bandmaster in an age when the brass band was king. At the Athlone Guild entertainment and keeping T.P. O'Connor in mind, Gilmore played the "Athlone Polka," his first musical composition written when he was a boy and the student of the director of the Athlone town band.<sup>1</sup>

Other town clubs followed the Athlone Guild in the 1850s such as the Cootehill (Co. Cavan) Benevolent Association, founded in 1851, and the Mallow (Co. Cork) Social Club, founded in 1856.<sup>2</sup>

In a decade when volunteer militia units were all the rage, several independent companies bearing Irish town or regional names were active before the Civil War. The Galtee (Co. Tipperary) Rangers drilled its 35 pikemen in the streets of New York beginning in 1851 and a military unit called the Duhallow (Co. Cork) Rangers under a Lieutenant Devinan appeared as an escort at the 1853 St. Patrick's Day Parade.<sup>3</sup>

In 1857 the Kenmare (Co. Kerry) Guards marched off 50 muskets strong to a target shoot in Flushing under its commander, Captain Fogarty. Two years later under Captain Timothy Connolly they traveled to Brooklyn for a joint practice with the Phoenix Guards, a Fenian unit training with the armed liberation of Ireland in mind. These were probably the same sentiments of the Kenmare Guards since its First Lieutenant, Mortimer O'Sullivan, had a brother, Daniel, then under sentence on a charge of treason against the British government in Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

One more militia unit with a local Irish derivation was the Garryowen (Co. Limerick) Musketeers which was active in 1860 just before the outbreak of the war.

Kenmare also had a hurling team in New York headquartered in Worth Street in 1859. They issued a challenge to any other hurling team to play them at their upcoming outing at Hoboken in March, but received no takers. Not at all frustrated they paraded off behind a wagon decorated in large letters "Kenmare Hurlers" and surmounted by an Irish flag they crossed the Hudson to the field where they played a match by dividing their squad into two teams.<sup>5</sup>

Immigrants from Kenmare continued to keep alive local pride after the Civil War as well. A Kenmare Benevolent Society was organized in 1871 and remained active into the 1870s, but apparently had died out by 1894 when a new organization of the same name was founded.<sup>6</sup>

A Drogheda (Co. Louth) Association was formed on Washington's Birthday in 1894 and may have marked the first beginnings of a wave that was to break over the city 10 years later.

In addition to the town societies a few regional groups were active in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A Blackwater (Co. Cork) Association was formed before 1880 and was similar to another Cork group, the Shandon Club, which had been organized in 1876. Both clubs were known as Cork clubs, but just how strong a local flavor to the Blackwater and Shandon districts each of them had is difficult to determine. The Shandon Club drew on the fame of Father Prout's song, the "Bells of Shandon" which was then popular piece on the parlor piano in many an Irish home.

The Shandon Club prospered for a time in the old Cork Seventh Ward on the Lower East Side where at its annual summer excursion a boat and barge departed right from the neighborhood from the foot of Rutgers Street for the convenience of the nearby Corkonian population.<sup>7</sup>

The growth of the county societies had only been marginally more successful over most of the second half of the 19th century than town and local organizations. By the 1890s there was a

county society in existence for almost all of the 32 Irish counties and almost as many in the then independent City of Brooklyn as well. From about 1902 up to America's entry into World War I however, an explosion of new town and local societies took place in the city. Whereas the old town societies were all named after major

commercial towns in Ireland, this new wave of town and local societies gave birth to organizations representing hundreds of tiny villages and rural areas. A few of these localities were so obscure that even immigrants who had once lived just a short distance away would sometimes not have had a clue as to their location. Certainly, most of these rural towns would have been just as unfamiliar and seemingly irrelevant to the Irish immigrant as they would be to the average New Yorker. The formation of

hundreds of organizations from the corners of Ireland offers a sad testimony to the tragedy of turn-of-the-century Irish immigration and the devastating effect such a loss of population must have had on geography of the Irish countryside.

#### GOLDEN AGE OF TOWN SOCIETIES

Soon after the Kenmare Club was organized in 1894, a group of young ladies from south Galway organized the Loughrea Ladies' Social



*Illustration:*  
The Loughrea (Galway) Ladies' was one of the first groups to come into existence in the wave of town society organization in the 1890s. From the John T. Ridge Collection.

Club in 1897. Although there was a men's group from the same town after 1905, the ladies were the founders of the pioneer organization for their native town. This was a pattern that repeated itself in the first decade of the 20th century when several towns had active ladies' societies but no corresponding men's group. The lady county societies usually were almost always organized with the aid of its male counterpart, but this was not the case with the town and local societies. This was probably due to the fact that the town societies were almost always only social and didn't have to worry about funding a benefit fund like the counties and required no elaborate rules and regulations. Unlike the county societies most of the town groups operated with no constitutions or lengthy by-laws, and their business meetings were consequently short and light-hearted.

Several county societies had existed for over twenty years by 1900 and their membership had acquired many more mature members. There was always a tendency for the old timers to hold on to the leadership at the expense of newer members, and this encouraged new arrival to found societies of their own. The town societies, therefore, were made up of young immigrants anxious to meet others, especially for match making purposes, from their native districts. Introducing the arrivals as they came to organization socials took on a great importance and there was always a formal reception committee at every function to make sure that unescorted guests did not feel left out. In 1908 the Brosna (Kerry) Social Club, for example, had dozens of "genial young men" at the door to escort the arriving newcomers directly to the refreshment table where they were helped to select from a vast array of food and drink. Even the music was selected to provide a regional appeal as the

*good old Kerry dances were in full swing and a son of the old land might consider himself once more in touch with "the green" on a pattern day in old Ireland.<sup>8</sup>*

The Castleisland (Kerry) Young Ladies promised something equally unique when it

announced "we guarantee a good night's sport to all who attend, as this affair will run real old Castleisland style."<sup>9</sup>

Another Kerry society, the Tralee Men's Social Club modestly announced that for "all those who attend a most enjoyable and social time will be resorted to, for it is expected that every man, woman and child that every lived in or knew Tralee will be present and in that respect the ball will be like one grand big family reunion."<sup>10</sup>

The sense of community did not end at the dances. Groups like the Ballyhaunis (Mayo) Young Men were especially caring for their fellow young immigrants and it was said that "the boys can not be exceeded for their kindness and hospitality to the sisters and brothers and are ever willing to lend a helping hand to those in distress." Money was regularly given to individuals and families in distress.

#### CLOSER TO HOME

The town societies felt they were able to bring an immigrant closer to home than any other type of Irish society, and very often on the night of the ball the hall was decorated with familiar scenes of home. The Loughrea (Galway) Men's Ball in 1908 surrounded the hall with "some very creditable paintings, including a sketch of the old Abbey of Loughrea, the work of E. J. Fallon, the treasurer of the club."<sup>11</sup>

Many of the town society dances were held around Christmas and New Year's, an especially lonely time for immigrants when nostalgia for the old country was at its peak. The Kilkelly (Mayo) Club contended that their Christmas dance was "the nearest thing to Christmas in Mayo."<sup>12</sup>

In 1909 the Iveragh (Kerry) Social Club revived "the old custom at home of putting one's New Year's gift on the first person, he or she meets after the hour of 12 o'clock," which the committee promised would generate some fun.<sup>13</sup>

The Rathmore (Kerry) Social Club planned another festive night in 1910:

*From this program it can be readily seen that this Saturday night will be a truly Irish night, and coming as it does,*



*within one week of Christmas our thoughts will wander back to the scenes of our youth. Some will probably remember, and fondly talk of their pleasures in youth, around Christmas, when bringing home the holly and laurel to decorate the Christmas candle. While others will be reminded of the general festivities, which comprised, the "clover," and the "threshings" held at this season of the year in their day.<sup>14</sup>*

It was Irish music that propelled every gathering of the town societies. Although two halls in the same building were nearly always rented out, one for American dancing (waltzes and two-steps) and another for traditional dancing (jigs, hornpipes, reels and sets), the latter hall frequently seemed to be the place of most of the

night's activity. The Kilrush Social Club (Co. Clare) in 1906, which was still featuring quadrilles in the American hall, provided Irish music by a uilean piper which in early 20th century account was sometimes confusingly referred to as a bagpiper:

*A very enjoyable feature of the evening was the Irish dancing for at no time during the night was there a lull in the hall. The stimulating effect of sweet Irish airs emanating from bag pipes kept everyone on edge, so that at times it was difficult to get standing room on the floor.<sup>15</sup>*

Although there was no need to explain the strong sentiments that drew immigrants, particularly newer arrivals, to the gatherings of the various town societies, occasionally reference was

**Illustration:**  
*The Rathmore (Kerry) Club presented a check to the U.S.O. for the needs of men in the service in 1942. From the John T. Ridge Collection.*

made as to just why such localities were significant for the benefit of the outside world. The



**Illustration:**  
West Side undertaker  
and Kerry men's  
president, Denis  
Buckley, was known as  
"the chief" and helped  
organize many Kerry  
town societies after  
1900. From the John  
T. Ridge Collection.

Glenamaddy (Galway) Ladies Club invited John J. Reilly, County President of the Ancient Order of Hibernians of Orange County, to talk to the assembled Glenamaddy people at a dance held at Donovan's Hall in Columbus Circle in 1910. Reilly was a minor celebrity having "but a few years ago caused the authorities in the West of Ireland some uneasiness" delivered a short talk on his home place which, slightly altered, would have fit for any of the scores of other Irish town societies in New York:

*I know there are many here tonight whose eyes have never feasted on the emerald isle but whose hearts glow for her freedom, and I also know there are many here, who, though born amid saints and schol-*

*ars, never heard of Glennamaddy until they heard of this ball tonight. Therefore, I take it that a few words on the little village may not be altogether inappropriate. It is situated in the northern part of Co. Galway, containing a population of about 300, and as it is in the centre of a migratory district, the majority of those are very young and very old. It has no industries, of any kind, for here as in every other part of Ireland the hand of English government is felt and her industries are crushed out before they have a chance to start, and no matter where you are from the town that hand, is, alas, too prominently evident. As Wicklow is the garden of Erin, so is Glenamaddy the garden of Galway, calmly reposing between two beautiful lakes, where abundant foliage grows from the water's edge.<sup>16</sup>*

While some town societies were restrictive in membership, others were not. The Ballygar Social Club (Galway), named after a town of 600 on the Roscommon border, had a membership that straddled both counties composed of "young men from the united Parishes of Killian and Killeroran of which Ballygar is the parochial residence." Nevertheless, membership was open to all Irishmen by birth or descent.<sup>17</sup>

The Drumshanbo (Leitrim) Social Club *includes for the most part the sons of Leitrim, but here are as many enthusiastic members from the neighboring counties and also a number of prominent Irish-American supporters.*<sup>18</sup>

When the Tralee (Kerry) Men's Social Club organized in 1906, it announced that it would bring together "all natives of the famous old town and of the surrounding parishes that made Tralee their business town and consequently knew it, its history and its many characteristics."<sup>19</sup>

Patricia O'Connor referred to The Tralee Social Club in her article on the apartment-house builder John Stratton O'Leary, a native of Kerry, and stated that "many of the people in the O'Leary flats came from Tralee, County

Kerry, and they founded the Tralee Social Club.” This may be one of the reasons why the organization lasted at least until the 1950s, but since the flats were built sometime after the society was first initiated, its founders had probably moved into the apartments at a later date. Certainly, such clustering of people from one town helped the organization to stay in touch with its immigrant neighbors.<sup>20</sup>

#### SIZE AND POPULARITY

Only rarely did accounts in the Irish New York weeklies mention membership statistics for any of the town societies, but they seem to have been small. Most of the societies were loosely organized and did not emphasize recruitment since a large number of members were not really needed to carry out their purely social goals. A dozen active workers was enough to keep the organization together. As long as there was an active core committee to run the socials and the society avoided activities like correspondence, public meetings, parades, political activity or expensive benefit payments, things went smoothly without large numbers. Organizations like the Ancient Order of Hibernians (A.O.H.) and the county societies were part of larger bodies: county, state, and national organizations (in the case of the Hibernians) or a linking organization (like the United Irish Counties for the county societies). These outside connections cost the A.O.H. and the county societies time and money, but the highly independent town societies were spared these outside burdens. The Ballyhaunis Social Club (Mayo), for example, in 1906 took in 30 members at one meeting that followed its annual picnic which brought their total to more than 100.<sup>21</sup> The highest figure for any of the town societies was given for the Duhallow (Cork) Football and Athletic Club in 1912 when it was reported that the flourishing organization had 250 members.<sup>22</sup>

As far as numbers go, it was always the number of tickets sold for their entertainments that was of primary concern for the town societies. They strove always to make it a genuine reunion of their home towns and district and

that meant large numbers were required. It was common to have 200 to 250 couples at many of the town society socials, but on occasion the more popular organizations attracted many more. The Kilrush Social Club (Clare) had a “homogeneous multitude of Kilrush exiles and their families” of more than 1,000 people present at its dance in February 1908. Some of them came from as far away as Newark, Yonkers, Patterson, Brooklyn and New Rochelle.<sup>23</sup>

A few of the town societies became so popular as to achieve almost cult status. The Gort (Galway) Ladies Social Club had so many supporters that in 1912 that it chartered a Ninth Avenue “el train” of 10 carriages to take a “joyful party” from Twenty-third Street to its dance in O’Hara’s Hall at West One-hundredth Street.<sup>24</sup>

An indication of the extent of such devotion frequently came in the form of poetry written in tribute by town society members. A stanza from a work dedicated to the Ballygar Social Club (Galway) is typical of the type:

*There will be fun and jollity  
Until the break of day,  
With winsome colleens dancing  
In the real old Irish way,  
From beaming eyes come glances  
As bright as morning’s star,  
When our maidens smile their sweetest,  
On the Boys of Ballygar.<sup>25</sup>*

While a town name would automatically draw immigrants to a dance, it became evident that the appearance of a popular community leader or special guest appearance at a dance brought out numbers greater than usual. The Drumshanbo (Leitrim) Social Club regarded their president, a widely known figure in the New York Irish community with his own business on Sixth Avenue, as part of the night’s attractions:

*Their standard-bearer, Thomas D. Murray, is a hustler, and no young Irishman is more popular among his self-exiled compatriots from in and around the dear old town of Drumshanbo, together with his numerous friends and acquaintances in Irish circles, will bring to his*

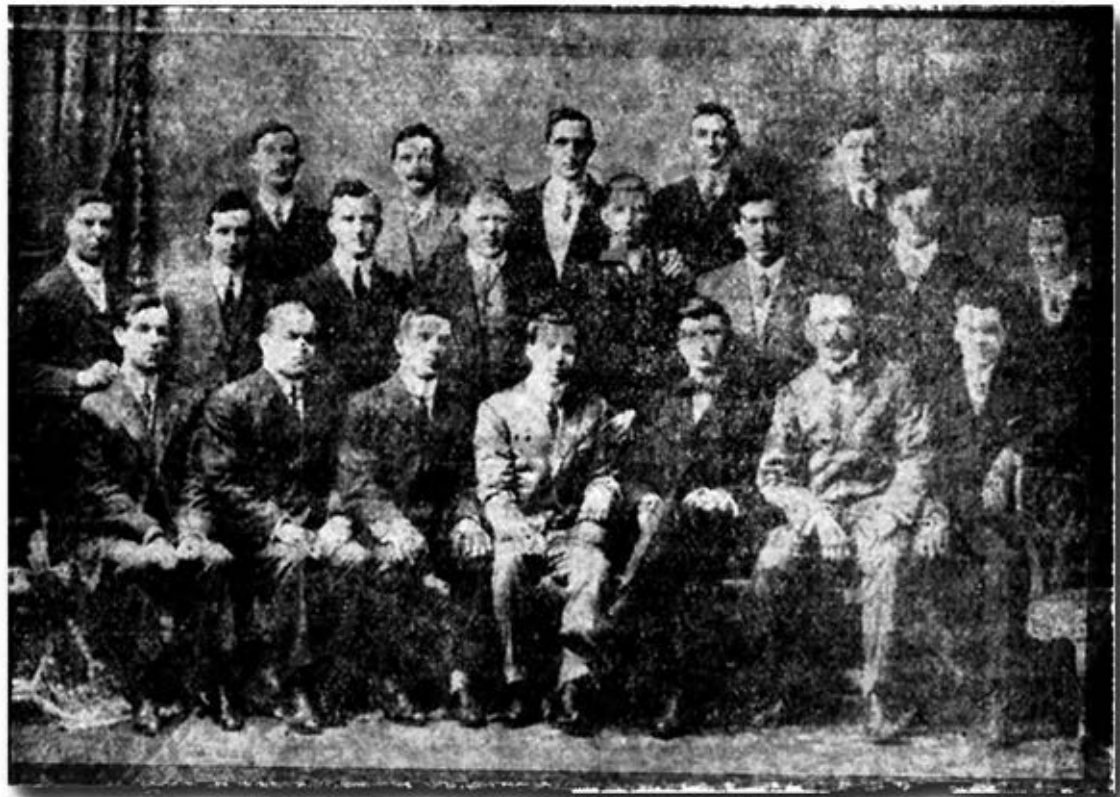
*standard a great and popular gathering. Captain Murray is a prominent member of the Leitrim Men's Association and is captain of the football team.*<sup>26</sup>

The Killarney Social Club (Kerry) featured two well-known athletes as headliners for its dance in February 1909. Daniel J. Sullivan had competed since the 1890s in high jump competitions in the United States and Europe. He won the championship for the U.S. and the world championship at the Paris Exposition in 1898. Side by side with Sullivan was a teammate and Kerry native, Mike Sweeney, who was then the holder of the American Amateur

Club at its St. Patrick's Day dance in 1908 featured John Paul Fitzmaurice "who has the distinction of being the only Irishman that was recommended for the Victoria Cross in the Boer War." As if to make up for his British Army service, Fitzmaurice rendered the long recitation "Fontenoy," which told the story of the decisive role a unit of Irish exiles played in defeating England while in French service. Fitzmaurice must have presented a very schizophrenic figure.<sup>28</sup>

Another unusual drawing card was Daniel Buckley, a survivor of the *Titanic*, who was honored at the Rockchapel (Cork) social in 1913. Buckley related his experience in an exciting

**Illustration:**  
A group picture of the Mullabawn (Armagh) Social Club from 1914 is one of the few surviving illustrations of a town society from this early period.



Championship for the high jump. Field sports in this era were a hugely popular spectator sports and any Irish champion would have been a familiar figure and attraction.<sup>27</sup>

Headliners were not always athletes, but sometimes just curiosities. The Listowel (Kerry)

speech to his old neighbors and was widely cheered for his tale of good fortune. Buckley then teamed with a female singer to entertain the crowd with Irish songs.<sup>29</sup>



## OTHER THAN SOCIAL CLUBS

While the town and local societies were almost always purely social in nature, there were a few exceptions to the rule. A handful had a beneficial element which provided sick and death benefits and included the word “beneficial” in their titles, while a few others added the word “athletic” and sponsored Gaelic football and hurling teams or hosted athletic field days. A handful of clubs styled themselves “commercial,” such as the Williamstown Commercial Club (Galway), the Claremorris Commercial Club (Mayo), and the Castlerea Commercial Club (Roscommon). These societies tried to direct the immigrants away from employment as common laborers towards positions in world of business. Several schools were then in operation conducted by Irish-born individuals to train their fellow immigrants to pass civil service exams or prepare them for white collar employment.<sup>30</sup>

While almost all the town and local societies came from rural Ireland, a few were formed to represent “city” people. A City of Cork Society was formed in 1896 for former city Cork City residents. Similar societies were founded for Belfast and Dublin in the next few years, and immigrants from Sligo town tried to organize a club, apparently without success, in 1913.<sup>31</sup>

A group called the Garryowen Social Club seems to have catered specifically to Limerick City people. All of these societies died out during World War I, but the Belfast group was revived in 1922 and continued for many years thereafter.<sup>32</sup>

All these more urban groups were on good, if not close, terms with their respective county societies, so it seems to have been just a question of geography which divided city and country people rather than economic or social snobbery. The Garryowen Society in 1906 demonstrated clearly at one of its meetings just how solidly it stood with the country people who had suffered evictions in the days of the land troubles:

*While the meeting was in session, Mr. Prendergast, ex-sergeant R.I.C. Limerick, and Mr. Con Fogarty, entered the hall and were introduced by a member. Joseph Claney, vice-president, strongly objected*

*to the presence of Sergeant Prendergast, saying that the time has come when young Irishmen in America should show their condemnation of men who in the time of the old Land League days showed their bitter feelings toward Ireland; he now asked the members to full co-operate with him in having Mr. Prendergast leave the hall. The president immediately asked him to leave and he left amid jeers and hisses.*<sup>33</sup>

One of the reasons why local societies came into existence involved the question of language. Ireland in 1900 had large areas along the western seaboard where Irish was the dominant language, and New York was a vast but little known sea of Irish speakers. The Gaelic League had formed a branch in New York in 1906 called the St. Brendan's Branch with the idea that native Irish speakers from Kerry and Cork would be drawn into it. This was successful, but it was a composite group, mainly *Gaeltacht* speakers with scholars and learners anxious to immerse themselves in their midst. The intellectuals and better educated folk who were the prime movers of the Gaelic League certainly meant well, but their presence did not allow a genuine native Irish speaking group to develop. It also seemed to have been an organization that was imposed from the top down, created by the scholars at the top and handed down to the native speakers below. Consequently, it was kind of a mix of two worlds that were not a perfect fit.

The native Irish speakers of New York did form two groups that were primarily Irish speaking. The Iveragh Social Club gathered members from the peninsula of that name in Kerry, which was already changing from Irish to English use, but where many hoped for a complete revival. At its inauguration in 1909 a committee of the Iveragh Social Club recommended that “all members who can should use the Irish language as much as possible during the evening.” This motion was “generally approved by those present” and “every evening thereafter all are asked to aid this purpose and to confine themselves as much as they can to the language used by our forebears.”<sup>34</sup>

The second society was the South Kerry Gaelic and Literary Society in 1909. While this was organized with the aid of the Gaelic Society, the difference was that it was exclusively for people from South Kerry. One of the organizers and its first president was Harry Lannen, a former school teacher in Ireland, and destined to be one of most prominent leaders of the New York Irish community in the 25 years that followed. It advertised that at its gatherings


*the sweet tongue of the Gael will be heard and all the Irish sets and reels will be gracefully danced.*<sup>35</sup>

The county societies were well established and knew they would be around for a long time, while it was widely recognized that the life of most of the town societies was unstable and short. The young singles that composed the town societies would soon be married and their old social network would fade away and in many cases their town society. It took new immigrants to keep the town and local societies going and interruptions like war or periods of low immigration killed many of the societies off.

In rare instances there were some individuals who just would not join a county society,

**Illustration:**  
Although fewer town societies came from Ulster, many towns like Bailieborough (Cavan) in 1929, were organized from the area near the six county border. From the John T. Ridge Collection.

**SOCIAL AND DANCE OF THE**



**BAILIEBOROUGH (CO. CAVAN) SOCIAL CLUB**  
At DONOVAN'S GRAND CIRCLE HALLS, 308-10 West 59th St.  
**THURSDAY EVENING, APRIL 4, 1929**  
Proceeds to Aid a Sick Friend  
**TICKETS FIFTY CENTS**  
Committee — B. Rogers, chairman and secretary; F. McGuire, treasurer.

#### WORKING WITH THEM

Rather than being rivals to the county societies, the town and local societies usually worked closely with them as a child would with a parent. County organization members were members of their home-town associations and vice versa. They supported each others social events and avoided conflicts of scheduled activities, and each type of society recruited freely from the other.

but would have been at home in a regional society, provided it met certain criteria. Timothy O'Brien of Brooklyn and formerly of "ancient Desmond" wrote a letter to the *Irish Advocate* protesting that county names were artificial boundaries "imposed upon us" by the British. He argued that:

*It is time to forget the miserable old clan system, which has brought so much misery*

*on our native land. If we can't have one Irish society at least call them after their real Irish boundaries like Desmond (Cork & Kerry) Thomand (Clare & Limerick). I will never join a county association.<sup>36</sup>*

#### HALCYON DAYS FOR THEM

The period between 1900 and the American entry into World War I were halcyon days for the town and local societies. With plenty of young people still around to form and make the name of their native regions famous, a glance at a newspaper like New York's *Irish Advocate* made it appear as if all Ireland was resident in the city. But a careful examination of the town and local societies reveals that their numbers came chiefly from Ireland's western seaboard in counties like Kerry, Cork, Limerick, Tipperary, Clare, Galway, Mayo and other Connacht counties. Only a scattering of organizations were formed by immigrants from Leinster and from many parts of Ulster. In short, where there was a district in Ireland of high emigration, and this meant in general the western seaboard, it was likely that a corresponding town or local society would be found in New York.

It is difficult to arrive at just how many towns and local societies existed in New York in the first two decades of the 20th century; many of the groups rarely, or perhaps not at all, found any mention in the New York Irish weekly press. Nevertheless, an idea can be gathered from a random pick of just a few of the societies whose activities appeared in the *Irish Advocate* for the period between 1906 and 1918. Again, it is just a small sampling of the names of the vast number of town and local organizations which operated during that time:

**Clare**—Scariff & Feakle, Kilrush, Loughgreaney, Miltown Malbay, Sixmilebridge & Tula, West Clare Soc. Club; **Limerick**—Carrickerry, Glin, Abbeyfeale, Garryowen, Clorina & Mungret, Adare, West Limerick Soc. Club; **Kerry**—Ballylongford, Duagh, South Kerry, Ballybunion, Kenmare, Castleisland, Newtownsandee, Tralee, Listowel, Brosna, Iveragh, East Kerry, Caherciveen, North Kerry, Rathmore, Valencia; **Cork**—Castlehyde,

Bantry Bay, Cork City, Brogeen, Mallow, Duhallow, Banteer, Beara, Knocknagree, Rockchapel; **Tipperary**—Nenagh, Clonmel, Slievenamon, Fethard, Cashel, Mullinahone, Ardfinan, Drangan; **Mayo**—Ballindine, Ballinrobe, Hallowell, Killala, Castlebar, Claremorris, Cong, Irishtown, Croaghpatrick, Ballyhaunis, Knock, Swinford, Achill, Charlestown, Erris; **Leitrim**—Carrick on Shannon, Dromod, Aughawillan, Drumshanbo, Drumkeerin, Dromahair, Carrigallen & Manorhamilton, Ballinglera, Gortlettragh; **Roscommon**—Stroketown, Boyle, Castlerea & Ballymoe, Ballinlough & Castlerea, Cloonfad; **Galway**—Dunmore, Gort, Ballygluinen, Mountbellew, Portumna, Kilkerrin, Ballinasloe, Creggs, Ballygar, Ahascragh & Caltra, Williamstown, Loughrea, Glenamaddy, Kilkerrin, Tuam; **Sligo**—Cliffoney, Tireragh, Gurteen, Bunduff, Tubbercurry; **Cavan**—Bailieborough, Kilnaleck, Ballyjamesduff, Crosserlough; **Monaghan**—Castleblayney, Ballyboy, Donoughmoynne, Carrickmacross; **Down**—Newry & District; **Armagh**—Culloville, Mullabawn, Sons of South Armagh; **Tyrone**—Bekan & Logboy, Kildress, Broughderg, Clogher; **Donegal**—Ballyshannon; **Westmeath**—Raharney, Mullingar; **Longford**—Colmcille, Killoe, Ballinamuck, Drumlish; **Dublin**—Dalkey; **Carlow**—Old Leighlin; **Kilkenny**—Marble City Boys, Callan; **Laois**—Clonaslee; **Wicklow**—Laragh.

#### ADJUSTING TO LIFE IN NEW YORK

The success of the town and local societies in the first two decades of the twentieth century certainly impressed many observers of the Irish social scene in the city. Not the least impressed were the Irish dance hall owners who soon began using some of the town and local names to draw a crowd to their establishments. Sometimes the owners just announced a dance for a particular town or area and hoped advertising and word of mouth would bring exiles from those localities flocking to their doors, but soon they became more sophisticated by using the names or real or made-up people to sponsor the

dances. Sometimes the dance hall owners even went to the trouble to set up bogus societies with town or local affiliation. It was difficult for a potential patron to tell the real societies organized by the immigrant's themselves from the paper organizations set up for by the dance hall owners. This situation soon led to conflicts between the genuine societies who felt their good name and reputation was being co-opted by the dance hall owners.

In 1910 a controversy broke out between the Ballygar Social and Benevolent Association

ation. Nolan did not shrink from the fight and slanderously referred to the supposed shabby origins of the Ballygar S. & B. members. Their letter of reply to Nolan captures some of the anger of the moment:

*But Mr. Nolan reaches the climax of stupidity when he says "They are from the slums of other towns." Too bad they are not of the same caliber as he. Lord save us, what a galaxy of geniuses we should have.*

*No, Mr. Nolan, you lie when you say so and you know it. They are what they*

THE WEST'S AWAKE

**ST. PATRICK'S NIGHT CELEBRATION AND BALL**

— of the —

**CONNEMARIA SOCIAL CLUB**

Under the Auspices of the Boys and Girls From

**Cliden, Rosmuck, Oughterard, Cong, Newport, Westport, Clunbur, Roundstown and Hedford**

AT TUXEDO BALLROOMS  
637 Madison Avenue, Corner 59th Street

Entertainment Commencing at 11 P. M. Will Be Under Supervision of  
Miss Kitty Creed and Geo. Potter

Irish Music by Prof. Joe Flanigan, Ed. Cody, Walter Lally and  
Dick O'Keefe

American Music by Winslow Bros.' Tuxedo Ballroom Orchestra

Don't Miss the Best Affair of the season

**Illustration:**  
*Irish dance hall owners became very careless in creating bogus organizations to attract home-sick immigrants to their halls. In 1928 the Tuxedo ballroom not only misspelled the name Connemara but three of the listed towns as well. From the John T. Ridge Collection.*

(Galway), an organization of some year's standing, and a new organization called the "Boys from Ballygar" that operated out of one of the dance halls known as Celtic Hall. The Boys from Ballygar used the name of an ex-member of the Ballygar Social and Benevolent, J. Nolan, to advertise a series of dances which soon brought an adverse reaction from the original society. The original group objected to the bogus society with a letter to the *Irish Advocate* and a short letter war broke out between Nolan and members of his old associ-

*have always proved themselves to be, a body of young men of which any race or nation might well feel proud....Mr. Nolan, whenever you are running off a social affair again, do so on your own merits and not on the reputation of the Ballygar S. & B. Association.<sup>37</sup>*

An almost identical situation occurred three years later when the Ballyshannon (Donegal) Social Club sued Charles Gallagher, a former member, over the right to use a similar name, the

**16TH ANNUAL BALL**  
— of the —  
**CLOONFAD LADIES**

At the INNISFAIL BALLROOMS — 56th St. and Third Ave.  
**Saturday Night, February 7, 1931**

All Music Under the Direction of **EDDIE BURKE**—Hear the Latest Broadway  
Hits and the Oldest Irish Music

ADMISSION : : : : FIFTY CENTS

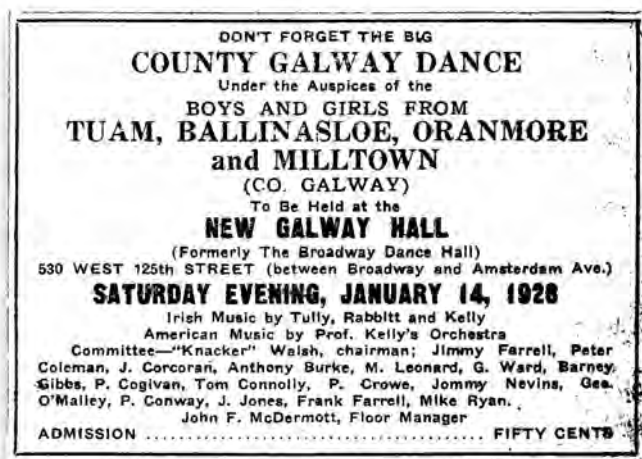
Ballyshannon & Melvin Side Social Club in advertisements for a dance held at the Central Opera House. The case was heard at the New York County Court House in November with the original society seeking an injunction against Gallagher and his associates “restraining them and each of them in anyway using the name Ballyshannon or any compound or form thereof in connection with a dance to be held on November 29, 1913.” Much to the disappointment of the Ballyshannon Social Club the case was “dismissed without charge.” This apparently stopped any effort to prevent the dance halls from using any name they wanted and the practice seemed to proliferate thereafter.<sup>38</sup>

In the 1920s advertising for dance hall sponsored town dances began to get more and more ludicrous. Not content with one town name in their advertisements of the dances of bogus town organizations, the promoters added another and then another town name to organizations that now included sometimes a half dozen or more locations. An advertisement for a dance at Galway Hall, 539 West 125 Street, in 1928 promoted an affair for the “Boys and Girls from Clifden, Letterfrack and Kilmilken, Connemara, West Galway and Shannaugh, Glann, Kilkerrin, Ballymoe, Gurthinadieve and

Williamstown, East Galway.” Besides sounding like stops along a railway line, these towns were so far apart that they would have had little or no contact with one another in the old country. Their only link was they were all in Galway, but geographically they were spread across a 65-mile line from west to east that included significant obstacles between them such as mountain, farmland, bogs, lakes and rivers.<sup>39</sup>

World War I interrupted Irish immigration for about half a dozen years, and when immigration resumed in the 1920s it was not at the same level as before the war. The Irish social scene in New York quickly resumed most of its pre-war vigor, but there appears to have been fewer town and local societies still active. Which of them survived and which of them did not seems to have been just a question of whether or not a few activist individuals were still in place. One dynamic individual was sometimes enough. The Williamstown Commercial Club (Galway) from its founding in 1907 until the 1930s had the energetic John J. Hanley who was at the heart of every preparation for a social or dance. Although eventually others took his place, one key individual gave an organization many years of stability and set the framework so that others stepped to keep it alive.

*Illustration:  
The Cloonfad  
(Roscommon) Ladies  
in 1931 featured home  
town uilean piper  
Eddie Burke. From  
the John T. Ridge  
Collection.*



**Illustration:**  
*Irish dance halls cast a wide net in 1928 by using the names of Galway towns that were situated as to include almost all of east Galway. From the John T. Ridge Collection.*

Those organizations that survived into the 1920s and '30s were strengthened by not only a cadre of old-timers with experience, but by the still numerous "greenhorns." The Cloonfad (Roscommon) Social Club celebrated its 24th anniversary in 1936 and was able to broaden its appeal, not primarily to young people, as was the case before the war, but to all ages, a "big family gathering." The committee promised "a dance for the married as well as the single people, children included." The password for the evening was "Oh hello! I have not seen you since the last Cloonfad dance." Although town societies like Cloonfad probably didn't realize it yet, the city was already experiencing dwindling numbers of new arrivals as the economic depression and the Second World War combined to put an end to Irish immigration until the late 1940s.<sup>40</sup>

With all the efforts of the town and local societies directed almost entirely towards social ends, there was little possibility to divert the money they raised to purposes other than charity. On the other hand, the fraternal, sports, political and affiliated Irish societies had the demands of meetings, conventions, travel, benefits, equipment or dues to central organizations to worry about and, consequently, self-consumed much of the money they raised. The town and local societies had for the most part only short-term and specific goals for charity to concern them. Most frequently the fund raisers were to raise money to repair or build churches

and related property in the old country or for Irish clergy in remote corners of the United States. The needs of needy individuals and their families was also high on their agenda. Occasionally, some money might be raised for a monument in the old country, but for the most part fund raising was practical and direct.

One town society, the tiny town of Bohola in County Mayo, achieved superstar status among societies of its class thanks to its connections with some very prominent individuals. Early in the century three Sheridan brothers from the town

made their home in New York. Although they were all fine athletes, one of them, Martin, far exceeded the accomplishments of his brothers winning worldwide fame as the winner of several Olympic gold medals. Martin unfortunately was one of the millions of world-wide victims of the great influenza epidemic of 1918, but his brothers remained in the city as active members of the Irish community. Together with two brothers named O'Dwyer, William and Paul, the former destined to become New York's mayor in 1945 and the latter president of the city council some years later, they formed the Bohola Society in the 1920s. Initially, the Bohola group was centered in Brooklyn, but it later moved to Manhattan along with the fortunes of the two O'Dwyer brothers.

Just how unusual Bohola was for an Irish small town society in New York became evident in 1934 when it held a testimonial dinner for one of its members at the St. George Hotel, then a fashionable center for society gatherings. The huge ballroom was filled with New Yorkers who gave a long tribute to Thomas B. McGowan, a Bohola native and Irish community activist, but in a sense the dinner was really a reflection on just what could happen to a small Mayo town when its exiles made good. No less than the world-famous tenor John McCormack and another tenor, Jack Feeney,



who would soon be a national figure on his popular radio shows, sang a selection of favorite songs for the audience. In the years to come the Bohola Society became the home base for the O'Dwyers and enjoyed fame far out of proportion to the size of its small population at home.<sup>41</sup>

When America entered World War II the Irish social scene again went into a degree of hibernation. With war time restrictions the town and county societies that were still active

carried out their work in a subdued manner. Groups like the Rathmore (Kerry) Social Club directed their charitable efforts towards raising money for the USO. The Belfast United Social and Athletic Club sent Christmas packages in 1944 to over one hundred of its members in service. Amazingly, they received acknowledgements from each of them save for two who had made the supreme sacrifice.<sup>42</sup>

Two wars and an economic depression culled many of the town and local Irish soci-

**Illustration:**

*(top) A grand display for an Irish small town in New York was made by the Williamstown (Galway) Commercial Club in 1914. From the John T. Ridge Collection.*

**Illustration:**

*The Williamstown (Galway) Social Club was again a young people's organization in 1961 thanks to the small wave of immigration in that time. From the John T. Ridge Collection.*





*Illustration:*  
The Tarbert (Kerry) Social Club in 1908 was just as patriotic about its home county as it was about its native town. From the John T. Ridge Collection.

eties from the New York Irish stage. When immigration edged upwards in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a few societies like the Ballinagare Social Club (Roscommon) in 1956, were reorganized, but others had hung on long enough to survive the troubles of almost twenty difficult years. Societies like the Bornacoola (Leitrim) Association benefited from the active chairmanship of one of New York's most popular Irish-born priests, Father Tim Shanley.<sup>43</sup>

Several town societies though apparently surfaced only long enough to raise money for a church building project in the old country before fading away. Briefly, local committees representing places like Abbeylara (Longford), Geevagh (Sligo), Killeavy (Armagh), and Ballyseedy (Kerry), appeared on the scene, raised their money successfully, sent it back to the old country—and then disappeared.

In the 1920s and 1930s many I.R.A. veterans from the losing Republican side in the Irish Civil War formed New York veterans groups named after the old regional brigades in which they had fought in the old country. There were dozens of them before the Second World War, but by the 1960s the East Mayo Brigade was one of the last active societies. Unlike the other regional societies its membership base could only get smaller, they

could add to the ranks only from the number of veterans still alive and for the future this was a no-win situation. Once a fund was raised in 1961 for a memorial being built for the old brigade back in Ireland, the work of the organization seemed to have finally been done.<sup>44</sup>

#### IN THE 1960s AND LATER

Among the town associations still active in the 1960s were the Rathmore Social Club, the Miltown Malbay Social Club, the Kilkelly Association, the Williamstown Social Club (formerly Commercial Club), the Kilkee Social Club, the Inishkeel-Ardara (Donegal) Association of Brooklyn, the Killarney Social Club, the Doonbeg Social Club, the North Kerry Association, and the Moylough (Galway) Social Club.<sup>45</sup>

The latter club kept itself alive by a yearly outing to the East Durham in the Catskills in the summer and, later in the year, a dance party as a reunion of Catskill vacationers. Most of these clubs had migrated to the Bronx to enjoy the support of the large number of Irish-born still resident there.

Since social organizations rarely announce their demises to the public, it is difficult to state just how many town and local societies still exist in New York. A tight circle of friends and relations from a locality can often be very insular and needs no publicity from the New York Irish weekly press. If one does not come from the locality where there is one of these societies, it is likely that the names of others that do exist mean very little and consequently are not kept in mind. Therefore, there may be as many as a dozen still surviving in various states of organizational health. Within the last 25 years the following societies have had some social activity: the Beara (Cork) Social Club, the Erris (Mayo) Association, the Mullahoran (Cavan) Social Club, the Doonbeg (Clare) Social Club and the Miltown Malbay (Clare) Social Club. With the possible exception of the Beara Club, all these organizations are still very much alive and continue to offer their members a variety of social events each year.<sup>46</sup>



## Notes

- 1 *Irish World*, Feb.18, 1882.
- 2 *Irish American*, Nov.1, 1856; Oct.31, 1857.
- 3 *Irish American*, July 5, 1851; *New York Times*, Mar.18, 1853.
- 4 *Irish American*, May 27, 1859.
- 5 *Irish American*, Mar.26, 1857.
- 6 *Irish World*, Aug.6, 1876; *Irish World*, 1894.
- 7 *Sunday Democrat*, Aug.18, 1877.
- 8 *Irish Advocate*, May 2, 1908.
- 9 *Irish Advocate*, Jan.25, 1908.
- 10 *Irish Advocate*, Feb.29, 1908.
- 11 *Irish Advocate*, Jan.25, 1908.
- 12 *Irish Advocate*, Dec.25, 1920.
- 13 *Irish Advocate*, Dec.19, 1909.
- 14 *Irish Advocate*, Dec.17, 1910.
- 15 *Irish American*, Mar..3, 1906.
- 16 *Irish Advocate*, Feb.19, 1910.
- 17 *Irish Advocate*, Mar.17, 1906.
- 18 *Irish American*, Mar.14, 1906.
- 19 *Irish Advocate*, Feb.29, 1908.
- 20 O'Connor, Patricia. *John Stratton O'Leary and the O'Leary Flats*. New York, 1989.
- 21 *Irish Advocate*, April 14, 1906.
- 22 *Irish Advocate*, Nov.11, 1912.
- 23 *Irish Advocate*, Feb.22, 1908.
- 24 *Irish Advocate*, Jan.27, 1912.
- 25 *Irish Advocate*, Nov.17, 1906.
- 26 *Irish Advocate*, Mar.10, 1906.
- 27 *Irish Advocate*, Feb.12, 1909.
- 28 *Irish Advocate*, Mar.14, 1908.
- 29 *Irish Advocate*, Dec.20, 1913.
- 30 *Irish Advocate*, Mar.10, 1928.
- 31 *Irish Advocate*, Jan.25, 1913.
- 32 *Irish World*, Feb.6, 1898.
- 33 *Irish Advocate*, June16, 1906.
- 34 *Irish Advocate*, Dec.26, 1909.
- 35 *Irish World*, Jan.9, 1910; *Irish Advocate*, Dec.4, 1909.
- 36 *Irish Advocate*, Oct.5, 1918.
- 37 *Irish Advocate*, Feb.26, 1910.
- 38 County of New York, County Court House, Special Term—Part I, *Ballyshannon Social Club vs. Charles Gallagher*, No.32168, vol.20—1913.
- 39 *Irish Advocate*, May 5, 1929.
- 40 *Irish Advocate*, Jan.18, 1936.
- 41 *Gaelic American*, June 2, 1934.
- 42 *Irish Advocate*, Mar.3, 1945; April 14, 1945.
- 43 *Irish Advocate*, Oct.6, 1951.
- 44 *Irish Advocate*, Jan.21, 1961.
- 45 The author played the accordion at Inishkeel parties in the 1970s and 1980s. The society was originally formed in 1936, but was held in limbo for many years while the members went to war and raised young families. Con Gallagher, a past president, told me that originally the group was very restrictive in limiting membership to Inishkeel and Ardara. Other Donegal immigrants were not wanted. It was only in the 1950s that membership was broadened to include other parts of the county and finally from other parts of Ireland. Right to the end in the 1990s it still had a profoundly Donegal stamp however.
- 46 Interviews for this article were conducted with John J. Concannon, Past President of the Galway Association; James Mulvihill, Past President of the Kerrymen's Social and Benevolent Association; Patrick Cahill, President of the County Cavan Association; Martin Kelly, National Director of the Ancient Order of Hibernians; John Garvey, Past President of the County Mayo Association.