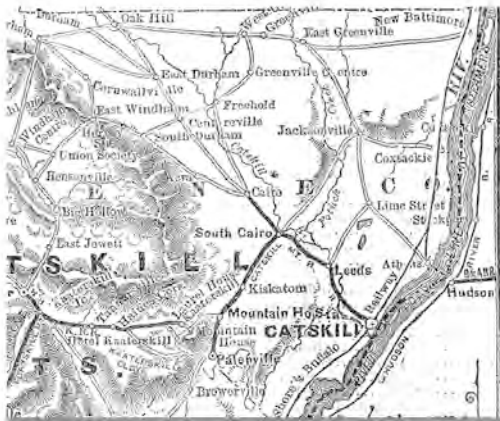


# Music in the Mountains: The Irish Catskills and Traditional Music

BY BRENDAN DOLAN



In the mid-1950s, the hamlet of Leeds in Greene County, some 120 miles north of New York City, employed a traffic cop to direct the flow of summer vacationers to Mass at St. Brigid's Catholic church. By 1959 a new church four times its size was erected to accommodate parishioners.<sup>1</sup> On Labor Day weekend, 1964, Murphy's in nearby South Cairo hosted an impromptu session of traditional music that lasted four days. As Andy McGann, Joe and Seamus Cooley, Bobby Gardiner and others soaked through their shirts playing jigs and reels, Johnny Cronin fed nickels into the payphone so his landlord back in the Bronx could listen.<sup>2</sup> On big weekends in the mid-1960s, McKenna's in East Durham easily went through a hundred cases of beer a night, the customers ten deep at the bar. John McKenna had to build a new out building to keep the beer cold.<sup>3</sup>

In its heyday, there were "seventeen places to hear music, seven nights a week" in East Durham.<sup>4</sup> Today, only three Irish resorts are open for the full season. South Cairo's three resorts are gone, and only the Inn at Leeds survives in Leeds. Routes 23B and 145, which connect these three New York State hamlets across a distance of fifteen miles, bear traces of the region's former prosperity and uncertain future: clusters of crumbling bungalows, empty swimming pools and

"For Sale" signs. Leeds, South Cairo and East Durham form the spine of the Irish Catskills, the choice vacation destination of New York's Irish and Irish-Americans for generations in the twentieth century. This study will examine the development of this area as a distinctively Irish destination, and identify some of the factors that have led to its relative decline. In addition, it will consider how the music of this time and place provides a direct reflection of the evolving identity of vacationers who created and sustained the Irish Catskills.

## STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

The Irish Catskills have always depended upon the fortunes and shifting demographics of New York City's Irish and Irish-American communities. In living memory most trace the beginning of the Irish Catskills to the late 1930s, while a closer inspection shows a strong Irish vacationing presence in the region at least as early as the 1890s. In fact the history of the Irish in the Catskills can be subdivided into at least three distinct stages: the late nineteenth century to the end of the Depression, the late 1930s to the early 1970s, and the 1970s to the present. These stages can be further subdivided but will serve as broad categories for the purposes of this study. An examination of each of these stages will show that the history of the Irish Catskills is a product of the intersection of the Irish-American immigrant experience with the American conception of vacation. This intersection has left its most tangible legacy in the area's resort landscape, which has changed with each successive wave of Irish vacationers.

## A HYBRID LANDSCAPE

In the words of Valene Smith in her pioneering anthropological study of tourism, *Hosts and Guests*, "a tourist is a temporarily leisured person who voluntarily visits a place away from home

### Illustration:

*The Irish Catskills region. Detail from Hudson River Day Line schedule, 1888. Courtesy of New-York Historical Society.*

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for the purpose of experiencing a change.”<sup>5</sup> For most Americans this temporary leisure did not exist until the late 1800s when the restructuring of the American economy along a corporate model created it. As a result

*“Over the last half of the nineteenth century a vacationing infrastructure emerged in this country: a financially comfortable population whose work was structured to allow for short periods away, a range of resorts to receive would-be vacationers, and a transportation network to get people where they wanted to go. Together these circumstances allowed the American middle class to assume the privilege of vacationing—something that had once been reserved primarily for the elite.”<sup>6</sup>*

By the turn of the century a growing number of Irish immigrants were firmly entering this American middle class. According to historian Mary Kelly:

*In the years following the calamity of Famine and up through the following decades... thousands arrived skilled in particular professions or trades, educated to varying standards or possessing the means to establish within a facet of the burgeoning commercial world... The executive boards of such bodies as the Friendly Sons, the Emigrant Savings Bank, and the Emigrant Association reflected strands of Irish culture often overshadowed by the wealth of attention accorded the more cataclysmic aspects of the immigrant influx. Affluent lawyers, physicians, politicians and other professionals progressed distinctly and often publicly, often distancing themselves from working class compatriots.<sup>7</sup>*

Middle class and upper middle class Irish immigrants were not only following the footsteps of their WASP predecessors into the professional realm, but into the leisure realm as well. Happy to avail themselves of the exciting new phenomenon known as summer vacation, women and children spent their weekdays ensconced in blissful pastoral boardinghouses, looking forward to weekend visits from their industrious fathers and husbands. Boardinghouses were distinguished

from hotels in that meals were all-inclusive, adding to their attraction by decreasing the vacationer's expense. The wealthier could afford to stay the season, the middle class for a week or two.

For New York's middle class Irish, the preferred destination in the Catskills was East Durham. They rented rooms at the Fern Cliff or the Weldon House or the Fitzgerald House, or at nearby boarding houses without Irish names or proprietors. Not all the vacationers who went to East Durham were Irish, but evidence that the Irish had achieved a majority seasonal presence there is supported by the erection of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church (St. Mary of the Mountains) in 1896. A souvenir dedication booklet described the chapel's function like this: “Beautifully situated among the Catskill Mountains, it will be the means of bringing back the lost sheep, and attracting the tourist to kneel at her altar and receive her blessing.”<sup>8</sup>

Through the 1920s and 1930s, the middle class vacation paradigm continued to apply in East Durham as more boarding houses came to be Irish-owned, such as O'Neill's Cozy Corner and The Golden Hill House. A 1929 group photograph from Mary Hartnett's Golden Hill House reveals the preponderance of women and children at East Durham's boarding houses during that season.

By the late 1930s, however, a new element joined East Durham's vacationing community creating a corresponding shift in the resort landscape. As early as the first decade of the century, American employers had begun to identify the benefits of vacation for the working class. According to vacation historian Cindy Aron, “These employers argued that paid vacations helped to reduce labor turnover, increase efficiency, boost morale, and promote employee loyalty.”<sup>9</sup> By the late 1930s and early 1940s vacations had become a reality for many of New York's Irish working class. This new class of vacationers was less concerned with bourgeois notions of middle-class respectability than with relaxing in the style they were accustomed to at home. In the Irish Catskills this manifested itself in an increasing number of drinking establishments, opened very often by proprietors who owned and operated bars in the

Irish neighborhoods of New York City during the off-season.

This trend continued through the 1950s, nurtured by a decade-long surge of new Irish immigrants who were comfortable with both the pub culture of the country they left behind, and the local bar culture of their adopted New York City. One of the most often cited reasons for the appeal of the Catskills to the



immigrant Irish is that its natural landscape reminded them of home. By the 1960s, the man-made landscape of East Durham had also come to resemble home in a pub-heavy Irish country village right in the middle of Greene County. With one difference: the country “pubs” also had the aspect of the urban “bars” of the immigrants’ adopted city neighborhoods. The buildings that resulted can be seen as the physical manifestation of the dual identity of the mid-century working class Irish-American: a blend of the rural experience they’d left behind (country pub) and the urban experience they had come to know in New York (local bar).<sup>10</sup> This pub/bar architecture was added onto the pre-existing boarding houses, which had catered to the earlier, more genteel generation. The result is a unique hybrid landscape, an amalgamation of two eras of Irish vacation culture revealing two accounts of the Irish-American immigrant experience in New York.

### THE BOOM YEARS

The late 1930s to the early 1970s represent the most prosperous phase of the Irish Catskills. The rise of the region’s prominence as a destination for New York City’s working class Irish can be traced through advertisements in New York’s leading Irish-American paper of the time, *The Irish Advocate*. Since its inception in 1893 *The Advocate* had advertised events and activities for

New York City’s Irish-American community on its back pages. Throughout the 1910s, games, picnics and excursions close to the city dominated the summer listings. Games were held at the New Irish Park in Wakefield in the north Bronx, Ulmer Park near Coney Island in Brooklyn, and especially Celtic Park in Long Island City. Boat excursions left Manhattan for Locust View Grove and Orchard Grove on the Long Island Sound or Hudson Grove Park and Oscawanna Island on the Hudson River, while picnics were held closer to home at places like Sulzer’s Harlem River Park and Casino at 126th Street and Second Avenue.<sup>11</sup> In 1921, some of

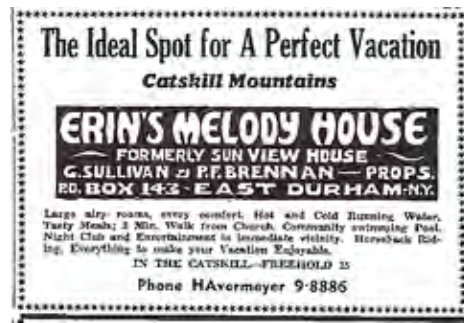
the advertisements were grouped under the heading “Rockaway Beach Resorts” for the first time. Dwyer and O’Shea’s Greenpoint Hotel, The Murphy Brothers’ Restaurant and Café, Feeley’s Rockaway Beach Cottage, and the Celtic Hotel offered rooms, bungalows, and even tents to rent “by the day, week or season” on the Atlantic Ocean in southeast Queens.<sup>12</sup>

By the late 1920s, advertisements for Rockaway resorts dwarfed smaller ads for country escapes in New York’s Sullivan, Ulster, and Greene counties, the Poconos in Pennsylvania, and the Jersey shore. East Durham is mentioned for the first time in the summer of 1924 in an ad for the Crystal Springs House (M.R. O’Leary, proprietor), which mentions the “Catholic church and casino (i.e., a bar with a dance floor) on adjoining grounds.”<sup>13</sup> Another O’Leary (M.J. O’Leary) makes an appearance in 1926 with Cairo’s O’Leary House,<sup>14</sup> while East Durham’s The Weldon House (Weldon and Pfeiffer, proprietors) is advertised for the first time in

**Photo:**

Vacationers at the Golden Hill House, 1929. Courtesy of Durham Museum.

1928.<sup>15</sup> Leeds also debuts in 1928, with an ad for Mrs. C.S. Wright's The Rambler, which boasts



a five-minute walk to church.<sup>16</sup> A small heading, "Catskill, N.Y.," separates a series of listings in 1929, which include East Durham's O'Shea House (E. O'Shea proprietor)—advertising electric lights and running water in addition to its proximity to church and casino—and William T. Madden's The Deerwood in Leeds at \$13 per week.<sup>17</sup>

The early 1930s saw the appearance of the following Irish establishments in the pages of *The Advocate*: Miss C. Heslin's The Heslin House (Leeds),<sup>18</sup> Norah McDonald's The McDonald House (Cairo),<sup>19</sup> and Mrs. John J. Sullivan's Sullivan's (Greenville).<sup>20</sup> Each ad highlights the nearby Catholic church. The first overt appeal to Irish vacationers, however, doesn't occur until 1935, when the phrase "large Irish patronage" is included in an advertisement for The Creekside House (Catskill).<sup>21</sup> In the same edition, Cairo's McDonald House lists "Irish and American dancing" as one of its attractions,<sup>22</sup> and in 1936 boasts its "real Irish atmosphere."<sup>23</sup>

### ERIN'S MELODY

By the late 1930s, large boxed advertisements for Rockaway resorts had taken over a full page of *The Advocate*, relegating the upstate ads to small type buried elsewhere in the paper. By contrast, George Sullivan and P.F. Brennan's ad for their new Erin's Melody House in East Durham pops from the page. With its name displayed in jaunty type against a black banner, Erin's Melody House boldly announces itself as "the ideal spot for a perfect vacation...[with] hot and cold running water...[and] night clubs and entertainment in the immediate vicinity."<sup>24</sup> Despite the existence of several other boarding houses in the area

already catering to an Irish clientele, the opening of Erin's Melody in the summer of 1938 is frequently cited in popular memory as the birth of the Irish Catskills.

George Sullivan and Paddy Brennan owned a bar in Woodside, Queens called The Halfway House.<sup>25</sup> For an as yet undetermined reason, in 1937 they purchased the Sun View House located across from The Weldon House on Route 145 in East Durham. They rechristened it Erin's Melody House and opened for business the following summer. Sullivan's brother-in-law Pat was part owner of a bar called The Three Musketeers in Jamaica, Queens.<sup>26</sup> He followed George's lead and purchased East Durham's Central Hotel in 1938, renamed it The Shamrock House and opened for the summer season of 1939.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, County Sligo native Michael Gilfeather was operating several bars in



New York City including The Sligo Hotel in the Rockaways. According to Mike Gilfeather Jr., his father was "getting killed on the rents" and looking for a way out of the city.<sup>28</sup> One of his patrons, an Englishman named Reginald Thearle, had a place with a beautiful view of the mountains outside of Leeds. In 1938, after visiting the region, Gilfeather bought The St. George Hotel in the heart of Leeds. He renamed it The Sligo Hotel, the upstate version of his Rockaway establishment, and began advertising in *The Advocate* in 1940. The establishment of the Sligo Hotel signaled the beginning of a strong Irish presence in this formerly Dutch hamlet.

**Illustration:**  
First advertisement for Erin's Melody in *The Advocate*, June 25, 1938. Courtesy of Brendan Dolan.

**Photo:**  
Erin's Melody House, 2008. Courtesy of Brendan Dolan.

## CATSKILL CUFF-NOTES

In July, 1939, the “Famous McNulty Family” advertised that they would be appearing at East Durham’s Haypress Night Club and Cabaret (Cullen, White, and Slevin proprietors) every Saturday and Sunday night for the entire sum-



mer.<sup>29</sup> At the time, the summer season ran from the July 4th weekend to Labor Day weekend.<sup>30</sup> The Haypress (later O’Neill’s Tavern) was located on the site of the present day Darby’s, half-way between Erin’s Melody and The Shamrock House.<sup>31</sup>

That same month, Pete McNulty began a social column in *The Advocate* called “The News Nest.” Under a sub-heading, “Catskill Cuff-notes,” he mentions some of the active boarding houses not advertised in *The Advocate*. In addition to Erin’s Melody and The Shamrock House, he notes that the Irish are staying at The Weldon House, The Sunnybank House (Olaf Michaelsen, proprietor), The Mountain View Fruit Farm, and The Duhallow House (Julia and Mike Sullivan, proprietors—no relation to George). He also mentions The Irish House, a casino located between Erin’s Melody and St. Mary’s church<sup>32</sup>, a bar called Jennings’ and a baseball game at O’Connell’s Grounds (James O’Connell had owned the Fern Cliff house from at least 1924).<sup>33</sup> The existence of all of these places, coupled with the fact that a top act like the McNultys spent a summer residency in the Catskills, make a strong case that by 1939 the area had already gained enough momentum to sustain itself as an Irish vacation destination on a par with the Rockaways.

## THE 1940S

This momentum was only to increase through the war years and especially in the post-war years. The front page of the July 27, 1944 *Greene County Examiner-Recorder* announced “Thousands of Vacationists Arrive Here Over The Weekend...it being estimated that more than 3000 arrived in Catskill by *Day Line* steamer on Saturday and Sunday... There were also many arrivals by bus and train.”<sup>34</sup> The August 3rd edition noted that “Court House Square in Catskill was thronged with people waiting for buses and cabs until 9 p.m.”<sup>35</sup> A war-time ban on pleasure driving was lifted in 1944, and *The Examiner* noted “...there are more arrivals this year by private automobile than last season.... Last summer it was seldom that an automobile was seen parked near a resort, but this year there are many of them.”<sup>36</sup> Automobile traffic increased further in the post war-years, with a total of 10,000 cars crossing the Rip Van Winkle Bridge on the weekend of July 11, 1946.<sup>37</sup> In both 1945 and 1946, 500,000 persons visited Greene and Ulster Counties.<sup>38</sup> The Irish from New York City were a significant part of this movement.

The economic upswing initiated by WWII, the post-war boom years, and the increase in automobile traffic contributed to marked development in the Irish Catskills. In July, 1950, *The Irish Echo* featured nearly a full page of advertisements for Catskill resorts.<sup>39</sup> The listings reflect that in the 12 years since George Sullivan opened Erin’s Melody, East Durham had seen the arrival of John Slevin’s Shannon View House, W. Peters’ Peters House, and James Furey’s Longford House (now Furlong’s). Ed Mullan was advertising his Mountain Spring Farm (later The Blackthorne) and Max Wimmer his O’Neill House. In addition, after John Tarpey and Roger Feeley opened the Palm Inn on one side of town, Feeley went out on his own and opened The Tower View House (later Hardigan’s, then O’Brien’s) on the other side of town.<sup>40</sup> Most of the resorts upgraded their amenities too: The O’Neill House boasted the first cement swimming pool in town,<sup>41</sup> and The Shamrock House built a new dance hall in 1946.<sup>42</sup>

**Photo:**  
*The St. George Hotel, before being re-named as the Sligo Hotel. Courtesy of Mike Gilfeather.*



The 1940s boom extended to Leeds as well, with the addition of P. Cannon's Madison House, Michael Murphy's Margaret House, Bryan McManus' New Colonial House and Mrs. Kelleher's Paddy's Tavern, while South Cairo saw Owen Lamb open the Emerald Isle House which featured dancing nightly to an "Irish-American orchestra."<sup>43</sup> Other Irish establishments opened in nearby towns like Greenville, East Windham, and Cairo as well.

In 1948, John and Margaret McKenna bought an East Durham house from an eccentric Dutchman and began adding small cabins to the property. By 1957 there were 10 cabins and business was good enough for them to build a bar and restaurant called "McKenna's" the following year. In 1961 they added motel units to the property, and in 1963 a dance hall.<sup>44</sup>

#### THE 1950S AND 1960S

This trend toward development was typical as the Irish Catskills continued to thrive through the 1950s and into the 1960s. Road and bridge construction during the 1950s aided in this development, facilitating increased automobile access to the region. From the 1920s, local Route 9W, which meandered through the towns of Rockland and Ulster Counties on the west side of the Hudson provided the main bus and car route upstate. Before the Bear Mountain Bridge was completed in 1924, city travelers reached Route 9W by ferry across the Hudson. The Holland Tunnel (1927), the George Washington Bridge (1931), and the Lincoln Tunnel (1937) increased access from the city, while the Mid Hudson Bridge (1930) and the Rip Van Winkle Bridge (1935) connected local

Route 9 on the east side of the Hudson with Route 9W further upstate, via Poughkeepsie and Hudson respectively. These routes were slow and laborious for car-pooling or bus traveling Irish vacationers until the double lane Taconic State Parkway provided a practically non-stop route from New York City to the Rip Van Winkle Bridge in 1954. A year later the Tappan Zee Bridge connected the east side of the Hudson to the newly completed New York State Thruway, further speeding automobile access to the Catskills.<sup>45</sup>

The increased traffic benefited the developing region. Jerry Shea opened the Irish Center in Leeds in 1953 and Galwayman Ralph Kelly, Sr. opened East Durham's The Brookside Inn in 1956. Two more Irish establishments, Pat Duffy's Duffy's Green Isle and Pat Murphy's Murphy's, opened in South Cairo. Ed Mullan added a state of the art dining hall in 1965,<sup>46</sup> while The Sligo House in Leeds added a pool and an expanded dance



hall in 1967.<sup>47</sup> Tom McGoldrick bought East Durham's Weldon House in 1960, started adding motel units in 1963, and kept adding more units as late as 1976.<sup>48</sup> Jim and Nellie Gavin purchased the Golden Hill House in 1961 and continued to build on this property into the 1990s. Their family operates a successful resort there today.

#### THE 1970S TO THE PRESENT

By the early to mid 1970s, vacation patterns had changed. In the words of Neil Kellegher, proprietor of the Shamrock House, by the mid-seventies, "there was not that mob scene. That extra crowd busy-ness wasn't there and it stayed that way throughout the '70s."<sup>49</sup> There

**Photos:**  
(above) *The Shamrock House as it appeared around 1939. Courtesy of Neil Kellegher.*

(right) *The Shamrock House, 2008. Courtesy of Brendan Dolan.*

were fewer vacationers coming up for a full week, although the weekend crowds remained strong. Under the leadership of Jack Gavin, Tom McGoldrick, and others, a highly successful Memorial Day Irish festival was organized



in 1977, which helped business and extended the season. It remains a cornerstone of East Durham's tourist economy.

Several initiatives began in the mid 1980s to revitalize the industry. Resort owners organized under the auspices of The Vacationland Association to create the Michael J. Quill Irish Cultural and Sports Centre on the grounds of the former Blarney Star resort. In the words of Neil Kellegher again, "in the 80s, maybe it was the Reagan years, Reagonomics, it seemed to bounce back. Everybody was working together as a community on the festival. It still helps. Everyone chipped in. Nobody was hired. They went down with their lawnmowers etc. working very hard on the Cultural Center. Every one chipped into a pot at the end of the season to stimulate business like the Lake George association."<sup>50</sup>

The crowds at Mullan's remained strong through the late 1980s.<sup>51</sup> The music at Erin's Melody, Eileen's (later Darby's), O'Dea's (later Furlong's), the Ferncliff, the O'Neill House, Gavin's and Stack's also continued to draw business into the 1990s. That decade also saw East Durham become the home to the annual Irish Arts Week, a week of traditional music workshops culminating in a traditional music festival which has built momentum each year since its inception in the mid 1990s. Despite this, it's clear that the present resort industry

of the Irish Catskills cannot compare to the boom years of the 1950s and 1960s. Dan Barry summed up the most often cited reasons for the region's decline in a 2002 *New York Times* article. A Leeds resort owner told him that "factors known in the resort industry as the three A's—air-conditioning, airlines, and assimilation—mortally wounded his business. Air-conditioners replicated the cool of the mountains, airline deregulation made trips to Disney World [or in this case trips home to Ireland] more affordable, and time blurred ethnic distinctions."<sup>52</sup>

Two other factors also contributed to the decline of the Irish Catskills. First, Route 23 was completed around 1967. This trucking route connects both the Thruway and the Rip Van Winkle Bridge directly to Windham and points west, bypassing the towns of Leeds and South Cairo. The fortunes of those two towns took a direct hit. Second, a change in American immigration policy inaugurated by President Kennedy effectively cut off the flow of new Irish vacationers in the 1960s. As second and third generation Irish assimilated, the ranks of ethnic Irish were not replenished and the resorts lost their crowds. Furthermore, "the [established] Irish began to migrate out from the old Irish



neighborhoods in New York City to suburban fringes,"<sup>53</sup> obviating the need for the country escape that the Catskills had once provided. The increased financial pressures on upwardly mobile Irish and their college-bound children may also have diminished the desire for the annual expenditure of a Catskills vacation.

**Photos:**

(left) *McKenna's in 2008. The original building was purchased in 1948. Courtesy of Brendan Dolan.*

(below) *The Weldon House in 2008. Courtesy of Brendan Dolan.*

### NINETEENTH-CENTURY TOURISM IN GREENE COUNTY

An enduring question regarding the Irish Catskills is why they developed where they did. Pete McNulty voiced a popular explanation at the end of one of his 1939 columns: "The majority of folks I've spoken to say that they like the Catskills because (when they come to think of it) it reminds them of Ireland."<sup>54</sup> While this explanation is much echoed, further insight might be gained by considering the tourist-heavy heritage of the rest of Greene County. The Catskills became a summer destination for the wealthy beginning in 1823 with the construction of The Catskill Mountain House. The Mountain House was located on one of the Catskill peaks and according to historian Arthur Adams "by 1845 it had been expanded to fifty rooms, and ultimately, with the addition of two large wings, grew to three hundred."<sup>55</sup> After a boom in railway construction in the 1870s, several more enormous hotels sprang up. In 1881, Philadelphia millionaire George Harding erected the world's largest summer hotel, The Hotel Kaaterskill, close by The Mountain House, with rooms for 1,000 guests.<sup>56</sup> The Laurel House, at the top of the popular Kaaterskill Falls, a frequent subject of the Hudson River School painters, doubled its size in 1884.<sup>57</sup> The rail lines that provided access to these resorts traveled through the villages of Catskill and Cairo and the hamlets of Leeds and South Cairo, providing them with early blushes of prosperity.

The history of Leeds also suggests insights into the presence of the Irish in the Catskills. Leeds had been the site of two large woolen factories, which closed in 1881 and 1882. An 1884 history of Greene County described the factories as "chiefly in the manufacture of woolen cloakings, shawls, cassimeres, robes, etc. When in full blast, these mills...employed 700 operatives."<sup>58</sup> In 1878 St. Brigid's Church was built to serve these largely Roman Catholic workers but with "the suspension of the mills, regular services were discontinued."<sup>59</sup> In addition to the abandoned church, Leeds was left with "about 70 dwellings belonging to these mills, most of which are now unoccupied."<sup>60</sup> While the history never overtly identifies the

operatives as Irish, the implication is clear, confirmed by the name of the church. Where did these 700 "operatives" go? One possibility was employment in the great hotels and smaller boardinghouses that marked the burgeoning Catskill tourist trade of the 1880s.<sup>61</sup>

Developments in transportation enabled this trade to flourish. In the 1880s, numerous steamer lines and two railways on either side of the Hudson connected New York City to the Catskills, bringing an increasingly middle class clientele to the region. The Greene County economy began a gradual transformation from agriculture to tourism in response. "Local residents made extra money by renting rooms to tourists, or they converted their homes into small boardinghouses that accommodated one dozen to twenty guests."<sup>62</sup> By 1884 "the keeping of summer boarders [was] becoming a business of increasing importance" to Durham<sup>63</sup> and East Durham was described as "a charming place for boarders; bright, clean and new. Some of the city people own and occupy homes there."<sup>64</sup>

In 1888, the Hudson River *Day Line* schedule included a list of "summer resorts among the Catskills."<sup>65</sup> Of 14 listings for the hamlet of East Durham and 12 for Leeds, there is only one obviously Irish or Scottish name, Joseph McGiffert, whose boardinghouse could accommodate 75 guests in Leeds. The average house accommodated around 25 guests. The other proprietors sound predictably English or Dutch (Vedder, Wolcott, Hankinson, Van Tassell, Osterhout etc.) considering the area was settled by the Dutch in the 1600s and then by English transplants from Connecticut in the late 1700s.<sup>66</sup>

Between 1883 and 1906, the number of Catskill vacationers rose from 70,000 a season to 400,000.<sup>67</sup> East Durham's business seems not to have been greatly affected however, the number of boardinghouses even decreasing by one to 13 (as per the 1907 *Day Line List of Tours and Catskill Mountain Resorts*). Leeds saw an increase of five boardinghouses over the same time period, while South Cairo hosted nine boardinghouses by 1907, two of them with a capacity for 100 guests or more. Amongst the English and Dutch names, East Durham's proprietors now included the Mackeys and the Fitzgeralds, whose



Fitzgerald House was nearly double the size of the next competitor, accommodating a hundred guests. New Leeds proprietors with possible Irish connections included Ward and Cunningham, while George Duncan had opened the largest boarding house in South Cairo, accommodating two hundred guests.<sup>68</sup>

tion for Italians, while Purling and Roundtop began to attract a German clientele,<sup>71</sup> and the "...northern tier of towns, especially New Baltimore, Greenville and Durham, saw the growth of their business, as Cairo expanded as a destination."<sup>72</sup> By the 1920s the Fern Cliff House established itself as an Irish resort in East Durham,<sup>73</sup> as did O'Neill's Cozy Corner<sup>74</sup>



*Hotel Kaaterskill. Library of Congress.*



### THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

According to one view, by 1907 "the Catskill Mountain resort industry had reached its peak."<sup>69</sup> The regions surrounding the mountains continued to convert to a tourist economy however, as E. Ingersoll notes in his 1910 *Illustrated Guide to the Hudson River and Catskill Mountains*:

*"...the principal business of the whole local district between the Hudson and the mountains is the entertainment of city people during the hot months. It is a fact, indeed, that the area of cultivated land, and the care of farming and dairying, decrease year by year, since all the farmers are becoming boarding-house keepers...."*<sup>70</sup>

As the wealthy Anglo-American trade of the big mountain top hotels dwindled, the smaller boarding houses of the adjacent countryside began to take on distinct ethnic identities during the 1920s. Greene County chronicler, Field Horne reports that Cairo became a destina-

(later the O'Neill House), and Mary Hartnett's Golden Hill House.<sup>75</sup>

### THE ROARING TWENTIES

In time, other developments contributed to the location of the Irish Catskills within Greene County. The rise of the automobile and the relative remoteness of East Durham made it a hotspot during the bootlegging days of Prohibition, 1919 to 1933. Notorious gangster, Legs Diamond escaped assassination at the Aratoga Hotel in Cairo,<sup>76</sup> frequently stayed at a boardinghouse down the road from what would become Ed Mullan's Mountain Spring Farm,<sup>77</sup> and supplied booze to the Casino across the street from St. Mary's.<sup>78</sup> A densely illustrated 1928 tourist guide to the Catskills aimed at motorists devotes a full page to East Durham—"The Friendly Village." The natural setting and the nightlife are touted in this "growing community...whose hotels and boarding houses are

**Photo:**  
*Catskill hotels in the 1880s. The Hotel Kaaterskill is shown at top. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

expanding and taking an ever increasing number of people.” There is no mention of any especially Irish character to the town although the O’Shea House (Mrs. Ellen O’Shea, Prop.) is advertised. Two dance halls appear to have made East Durham somewhat notorious during the Roaring Twenties: “The Casino. The largest dance hall in the Catskills” (owned by Irish-American Daniel Ahern) and The New Rox-More owned by O.C. Barlow.<sup>79</sup> A Durham village resident, Oriana Atkinson, noted in 1928, “One small town near us’—[East Durham is strongly implied]—‘has gradually assumed a reputation for drunkenness and general cutupishness among the visitors.’”<sup>80</sup>

#### A SEASONAL IRISH PRESENCE

The 1930 census listed 355 “families” in the two districts comprising the town of Durham.<sup>81</sup> Out of these families, only eight people identified their country of birth as Ireland. Of these, one woman, Hannah West, was married to the proprietor of a boarding house while two more were employed as cooks in boarding houses. A third woman was the wife of a dairy farmer, and a 54-year-old man listed his occupation as “helper” in a boarding house. The final Irish-born couple was James and Annie O’Connell. James listed his occupation as “farmer” even though he and his wife clearly ran the Fern Cliff by 1930. Perhaps this is an indication that the O’Connells considered taking boarders as peripheral to their main business of farming, or perhaps they wished to avoid declaring the extra income that the boarding house provided them. In either case it does raise issues about taking the census data literally.

Forty-one people in the town of Durham listed either one or both of their parents as Irish born. Most of these second-generation Irish were farmers, with the exception of Daniel Ahern, proprietor of The Casino, who listed his occupation as “manager—dance hall.” The vast majority of Durham’s residents were born in New York State with New-York born parents. The most populous second-generation ethnicity was German, then Austrian. The census data suggests that as late as 1930 there was not a significant year-round Irish presence in the town of Durham.<sup>82</sup> Though Durham’s Catholics had erected St. Mary’s Church in East Durham in

1896 (Rev. F.J. Walsh, pastor), it remained a mission church under the auspices of Cairo’s Sacred Heart parish, further indicating the lack of a populous off-season Irish presence in the town.<sup>83</sup>

#### THE DEPRESSION

There are conflicting reports about the fortunes of East Durham, South Cairo and Leeds during the Depression. On the one hand, a 1937 observer noted, “. . .in the past five years times have been hard. . . For a decade, each year had seen two or three hotels destroyed by fire, or torn down to escape taxation. These were never replaced.”<sup>84</sup> Others remember that during the 1930s, “Cairo, Leeds and Durham had forty hotels and bars with live music.”<sup>85</sup> “Boardinghouses in [the nearby towns of] Freehold, Gayhead, and Norton Hill were able to attract enough guests to operate throughout the Depression,”<sup>86</sup> suggesting that “. . .tourists found that the northern area of Greene County had as much to offer as had the earlier patronized mountain resorts.

Despite this trend, large centrally located properties were for sale in the hamlets of Leeds and East Durham by the late ’30s. When George Sullivan, Pat Kellegher and Michael Gilfeather bought them, the downtown areas of each were instantly transformed. Whereas Irish boardinghouses had been on the periphery of East Durham and Leeds since at least the 1920s, the establishment of Erin’s Melody, The Shamrock House and The Sligo Hotel as the central locations in these two towns cemented their ethnic identities. By the time the 1940s brought national economic recovery, these three entrepreneurs were ready to serve the vacation impulses of the New York Irish.

#### PAID VACATION

The success of these enterprises and the endurance of the Irish Catskills through the 1940s were in no small measure due to the introduction of the paid vacation for many American workers in the latter years of the Depression. A case in point is the Transport Workers Union, a heavily Irish union under the leadership of charismatic Kerryman, Michael Quill. Through Quill’s negotiations the union contracts of 1937 and 1939

granted the workers for the subway and bus lines of New York City paid vacations for the first time in their history. A 1939 postcard from East Durham to the union headquarters read, "Mr. Quill. Having a good time up here. Hoping you are well. Thanks to our union. Patrick Boland."<sup>87</sup> The efforts of Harry Van Arsdale of the IBEW also resulted in the first paid vacations for construction workers in 1941.<sup>88</sup>

#### TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN THE CATSKILLS

The ethnic transformation of the region is reflected in a shift in vacationers' musical tastes from the 1920s to the 1940s. In 1924, Irish summer vacationers at East Durham's Fern Cliff House held a winter reunion dance at Maennerchor Hall on Third Avenue in New York City. Of the twenty-four dances on the program that night, American fox trots like "That's My Baby" and one-steps such as "That Old Gang of Mine" predominated. Even among the waltzes, no Irish dances were included in the evening's entertainment,<sup>89</sup> a reflection of the American tastes of Irish-American vacationers in the 1920s. By 1939, the Irish vacationing in the Catskills preferred to dance to Rockaway headliners, the McNulty family, for an entire summer. And their tastes went beyond even the Irish-American fare for which that trio was famous. As Pete McNulty noted in his social column, Sligo fiddler Paddy Sweeney also appeared at The Haypress that summer. McNulty wrote: "Paddy's fiddling should keep the Irish set-dancers in a frenzy of leppin'—Powerful."<sup>90</sup> This change in taste is a possible reflection of what Marion Casey called the "first large influx of young Irish immigrants in [the twentieth] century [which] did not begin to arrive in New York until approximately 1925 [and continued] at a steady pace until about 1930."<sup>91</sup>

It's interesting to note that Sweeney played four sets on a Monday, an off night. Throughout the history of the Irish Catskills, traditional Irish music, jigs and reels, nearly always took a back seat to the kind of music popularized in the Irish establishments of Third Avenue and the Rockaways in New York City. Marion Casey's observation about New York dance halls and

musical taste in the Rockaways is equally apt in relation to the Catskills:

*"The need to maintain 'traditional' music and dance styles was less important to young Irish and Irish-Americans than the need to socialize with people like themselves. In this way, the dance halls helped the acculturation process by exposing them to American and Irish music and dance in a socially acceptable environment."<sup>92</sup>*

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, musicians who regularly played in the city's dance halls during the winter months appeared in the Catskills during the summer, some establishing long-held tenures at specific resorts. Mickey Carton procured a summer engagement in the Catskills for his sister Mary as an accordionist in 1941. It was there that she was prompted to sing publicly for the first time, beginning a successful career that lasted through the 1950s.<sup>93</sup> Accordionist and singer Vinnie Brown began appearing at The Haypress in 1939 and became a fixture at Kelly's Brookside and Shea's Irish Center throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Sligo fiddler Paddy Killoran and accordionist Frank McCarthy were resident at Erin's Melody, while banjo-player Happy O'Brien led an ensemble featuring Billy McGill on sax, Barney Burke on clarinet and Ralph Kelly on drums at The Tower View.<sup>94</sup> In the early 1950s, Jerry Shea introduced nightly music at The Irish Center in Leeds, employing an eccentric piano player, Tommy Cooper, famed for wearing a suit, hat, scarf and sneakers in the middle of summer.<sup>95</sup> The Sligo Hotel next door was forced to hire its own piano player, Tommy Lynch, in order to compete.<sup>96</sup> The Shamrock House employed a house piano player, Milton Pollack, as well.<sup>97</sup> All three played a mix of American and Irish-American popular music to a crowd rested from their day's activities of swimming, horse-back riding, handball, baseball, horse shoes, badminton, or bicycling. The Tower View advertised both indoor and outdoor shuffleboard.<sup>98</sup>

#### CAPLIS AND KELLY

While visiting traditional musicians were often asked to sit in for a "Stack of Barley" or "Siege of Ennis,"<sup>99</sup> traditional music per se was nur-

tured in the Catskills largely through the efforts of two men, Ralph Kelly Sr. and Matty Caplis.



**Photos:**  
Tommy Lynch, house  
pianist at the  
Sligo Hotel. Courtesy  
of Mike Gilfeather.

Portumna native, Ralph Kelly maintained an Irish dance band, “The Galway Blazers,” throughout the 1930s in New York City while working as a contractor. By the 1940s, he was playing jobs in places like The Irish House and The Haypress in the Catskills and fell in love with the area. In the early 1950s, he bought some property and built East Durham’s Brookside Inn, opening in 1956. While Vinnie Brown was the official entertainment, the bar became known as a welcoming place for traditional musicians to play informally. Players like accordionists Bobby Gardiner and Joe Burke, flute player Jack Coen, and fiddlers Johnny Cronin and Andy McGann led legendary sessions there, attracting huge crowds. Unable to get in the doors, music-lovers danced on the gravel outside while waitresses served revelers sitting on the surrounding stone wall. Late in the 1960s, The Brookside hosted famed fiddle player Aggie Whyte for a season. The bar retained its reputation as a home for Irish music up until its close in 1979.<sup>100</sup>

Matt Caplis, an Irish-American merchant marine from Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn, discovered the Catskills after a wartime trip to Albany in 1945. There he fell in with a local

crowd of music lovers at the center of which were concertina player and dancer Dinny Leonard, and legendary banjo player Mike Flanagan of Flanagan Brothers fame.<sup>101</sup> After accompanying them on trips to the Catskills, Matt bought a boarding house outside of South Cairo called The Overlook in 1948. He ran it as a business for a few seasons but then opened it up to any of his friends who needed a place to stay or have a few tunes. Matt was a gregarious man with a magnetic personality and lived his life in an endless quest for “the great night.” For him, an essential component of a “great night” was traditional Irish music.<sup>102</sup> As a result, musicians gravitated toward him and his house became the unofficial headquarters for traditional music in general in the South Cairo/Leeds area. Accordionist Billy McComiskey’s parents met at The Overlook in 1949. Matt’s sister, Mae Caplis, and Pat McComiskey spent their first date listening to Joe Derrane play his accordion just down the road at Paddy’s Tavern outside Leeds.<sup>103</sup> In the late 1950s, Matt bought another house in Leeds itself, which he called The Castle View and extended his influence over the bar owners in that town. He convinced Jerry Shea to hire traditional music, and in 1960 and 1961, The Irish Center featured a band that included John Joe Callahan, Vinnie Brown and Frank McCarthy on accordions and Mike Leonard, Dinny’s son, on banjo.<sup>104</sup>

Caplis continued to exert an influence in South Cairo as well, convincing Pat Murphy, a former driver for the Tulla Ceili Band (1957, 1960 All-Ireland Champions), to host some traditional music at his bar on Labor Day weekend in 1964. The word got around and the session turned into a now legendary four-day affair.

Profoundly affected that weekend was the 14 year-old Billy McComiskey, Caplis’ nephew, who spent every summer in the Catskills at a house his parents purchased very close to The Overlook. McComiskey remembers eagerly anticipating going in to Leeds in his teens, to see which musicians happened to be around Shea’s or later Gilfeather’s. Because of its proximity to the Thruway, Leeds gained a reputation for Sunday sessions: a last stop before the long journey home. Billy remembers box play-



ers Joe Cooley and Bobby Gardiner meeting up for a tune at Gilfeather's, Mike Flanagan playing banjo at Duffy's in South Cairo, countless house sessions at The Castle View and especially long hours with the late great accordionist Sean McGlynn listening and learning tunes. Sean spent a year in Leeds, living next door to Matty Caplis and working on the Mall in Albany. Caplis was a catalyst. He facilitated traditional music in the small hamlets of Leeds and South Cairo and almost single handedly created the mystique that there was "great music in the Catskills."<sup>105</sup>

Traditional music also figured in the history of Mullan's Mountain Spring Farm. Ed Mullan played some fiddle and melodeon and loved the music. The Bronx Gaelic League began annual weekend trips to his resort starting in 1955.<sup>106</sup> Initially organized by Anne Bergin, the weekend featured a big *ceili* with musicians such as fiddlers Andy McGann and Paddy Killoran or accordionist Bobby Gardiner. In the 1960s, Roscommon flute player Mike McHale tended bar at their newly built Colonial Room, attracting traditional musicians for informal tunes,<sup>107</sup> and in the 1970s fiddler Paddy Reynolds and accordionist Charlie Mulvihill played a weekday gig there.<sup>108</sup>

As a rule, however, the main attractions at the resorts in all three towns were more com-

mercial bands. By the early 1970s, the Catskills resorts were trying to outdo each other with showbands. Gilfeather's in Leeds featured The Irish Revolution, an American-based band from Derry. She's hired Joe Nellany and The Sligo Aces who also played Gilfeather's.<sup>109</sup> Mullan's featured Mary McGonigle, who had been Julie Andrews' understudy, and then Pat Roper through the late 1970s. Other bands that played the Catskills during this era were The Mason's Apron from Boston, who changed clothes for every set, Al Logan, "The King of Ceili," Luke O'Malley, who played an eight-row chordovox, and Frankie Curran and The Evergreens.<sup>110</sup>

As business waned in the mid-1970s, Gilfeather's organized a short-lived Memorial Day Irish festival in Leeds, which hosted the Clancy Brothers one year. East Durham continued with its own Memorial Day weekend festival,<sup>111</sup> which as late as 2008 was still one of the big weekends of the season for the community, attracting top name festival bands. John Byrnes organized his own Irish festival in Leeds, which continued through 2006. East Durham in the 1980s saw a renaissance of traditional music with players like All-Ireland accordion champion John Nolan and fiddler Pat Keogh performing at Erin's Melody for the "rent-a-crowd," a loose conglomerate of step dancers, musicians, and

**Photo:**  
From left to right –  
Mike Leonard, Frank  
McCarthy, and Vinnie  
Brown. Courtesy of  
Jimmy Kelly.



**Photo:**  
On vacation at the  
Ferncliff in 1963.  
Courtesy of Durham  
Museum.

traditional music lovers in their 20s and 30s, organized by the larger than life Bernie Morris.<sup>112</sup> The 1990s saw the establishment of the Irish Arts Week,<sup>113</sup> a week of traditional music workshops, sessions, and *ceilidhe*, which culminates in the Andy McGann Traditional Music Festival on the Saturday at the end of the week.

Today, Irish-American bands continue to play a mixture of Irish and popular music at Gavin's, The Blackthorne, or The Shamrock House, much as they did in the 1940s and 1950s at The Irish House or The Haypress. Little has changed concerning the relationship of Irish-American vacationers to the music they like to hear. Only the scale has been altered in the Catskills.

In many ways, the fortunes of the resorts in the Irish Catskills mirror the fortunes of New York City's Irish dance halls. As John Ridge writes, "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."<sup>114</sup> The same period shows the greatest growth and the longest sustained prosperity of the Irish Catskills. Within five years of the Immigration Act of 1965, the three largest Irish dance halls in Manhattan closed: the Tuxedo Ballroom, the Jaeger House, and City Center.<sup>115</sup> Within 10, the crowds visiting the Catskills had noticeably diminished. Today, the Irish Catskills, like Irish America itself is experiencing the next phase in a broad process of acculturation and assimilation. If the past is any guide, it is

a surety that the region will continue to provide a telling reflection of that process.

## Notes

The author expresses special thanks to Sancier Thomsen at the Durham Museum and to Hugh O'Rourke, Marion Casey, and Mick Maloney for their invaluable guidance and support.

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- 106 Interview with John Bergin, Anne Bergin's husband, April 28, 2008.
- 107 Mike McHale interview, March 18, 2008.



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McGoldrick, Tom, April 23, 2008.

McGrath, Kathleen, August 13, 2008.

McHale, Mike, March 18, 2008.

McKenna, John, April 30, 2008.

McKiernan, Peter, April 16, 2008.

McNally, Jean, November 16, 2008.

Mullan, Ann, December 22, 2008.

Nolan, Jean, August 30 and September 5, 2008.

Nolan, John, December 17, 2008.

O'Neill, George, April 29, 2008.

O'Neill, John, December 21, 2008.

Shea, Jerry Jr., December 17, 2008.

Stapchuk, George, November 16, 2008.

Tabb, John, December 11, 2008.

Talvey, Mattie, November 5, 2008.

Torrey, Eileen, November 24, 2008.

Zimmer, Robert, November 16, 2008.