

Making Music in Step: The AOH Division 9 All-Accordion Band

BY HUGH E. O'ROURKE, PH.D.



Photo:

A group photo of the Highbridge Division 9 All-Accordion Band taken at Hibernian Hall on Ogden Avenue in the Bronx, ca. 1956. Front

Row (l. to r.): John Brown, Felix Dolan, Mike Carty, John Keane, Jesse Winch, Barbara Smith, P. Nolan, Terry Winch. Middle Row: Sean McMahon, Florence Talry, Joe Fox, Bill Tobin, Arthur McDonnell, Mary Loftus, Jimmy Genaghty, Jack Fitzgerald (by flag), unknown. Back Row: unknown, Owen Martin, Philomena Regan, Bernie Walsh, Pat Trainor, Mary Mackessey, unknown, Walter Walsh, Marty Halpin, P.J. Conway, Larry Farrell (?), Jimmy O'Rourke, George Geisler, Willie Fox, Jerry Lyons, Jimmy McCann. Courtesy of Felix Dolan and Terence P. Winch.

When imagining a marching band, most Americans would consider a brass band as standard. Perhaps a bagpipe band would also be considered as a component of an Irish-American parade. Few would consider the possibility of an accordion band. In fact, a recent computer search failed to find any marching accordion bands in the United States. A small number exist in Canada. Most of those seem to have evolved from the Orange lodge tradition, which came to Canada from Northern Ireland. Accordion bands are still popular in Ireland and Scotland. Emigrants from these countries carried the tradition to England, Canada, and other English-speaking countries in the diaspora. Accordion bands in these countries are now usually composed of piano accordions rather than the the diatonic or button accordions.

In Northern Ireland, lodges of the Orange Order were very much involved in parades and marches. The lodges also had strong traditions of supporting flute or fife bands and, to a lesser extent, Highland bagpipe bands. The introduction of the accordion into Northern Ireland resulted in the formation of accordion bands that were always accompanied by drum sections. These Irish accordion bands were usually equipped with the more traditional diatonic or button accordions, rather than piano accordions. Bands with up to thirty members often played sectarian tunes, popular music, and Irish traditional tunes (Smith and Brocken, 2005, pp. 3–4).

ACCORDIONS AND IRISH MUSIC

Cyril Demain had patented the first accordion in 1829 in Austria. Also in 1829, Charles Wheatstone invented the concertina in

England, which is another type of a free-reed instrument with similarities to the accordion. Early accordions quickly became “the instrument of the people” because they were inexpensive and loud enough to be played for dancers. Providing a melody and chord accompaniment, accordions replaced many traditional instruments throughout Europe. Uilleann bagpipes in Ireland, musette bagpipes in France, and the recorder in Serbia all lost popularity to the new accordion.

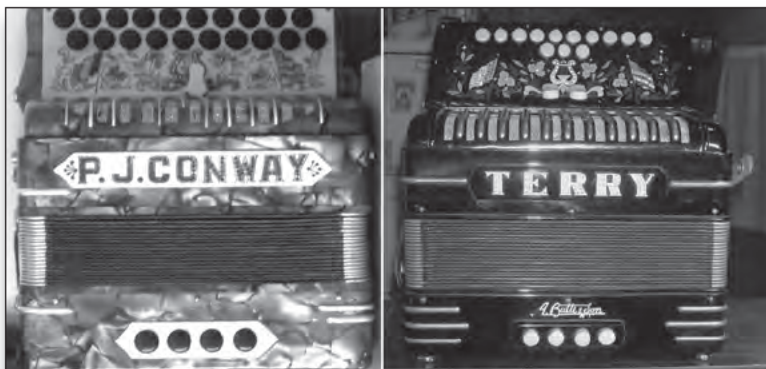
The true Irish traditional instruments are the uilleann pipes, flutes, harp, whistle, and fiddle. Accordions and other forms of free-reed instruments are latecomers to Irish music. Harmonicas, or mouth organs, melodeons, accordions, and concertinas were introduced into Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century (Breathnach, 1996, pp. 65–87.) The Irish often referred to the one-row accordion as a melodeon. Relatives in American often sent melodeons to their relatives or brought them back on visits. The melodeon was relatively inexpensive, easy to play, and its punchy sound was ideal to play for set dancers. It was also suitable to play for waltzes, flings, mazurkas, barndances, marches, and polkas. Because they were sturdy and louder than most of the more traditional fiddles, flutes, and uilleann pipes, melodeons became the preferred instruments for crossroads dances (Moloney, 1992, pp. 69–70).

THE AOH AND PARADING

The Irish-American community in New York has been long associated with parades and marching bands. The first New York St. Patrick's Day celebration occurred in 1762 when an Irish unit in the service of Great Britain marched to a celebratory breakfast on March 17. The tradition has continued for 250 years. To have a parade, however, you must have participants and, one would hope, music to entertain the marchers and the on-lookers. Music also helps to keep everyone in step. Throughout the long history of the Irish in New York, the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) and other Irish groups have provided both marching units and

bands to accompany them for parades.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians was originally founded in 1836 at St. James Roman Catholic Church in Manhattan as a fraternal and social organization. A major part



of its founding mission was to safeguard the new Irish immigrants from hostile nativist groups in New York society. The organization grew throughout the United States and now has some eighty-thousand members in forty-six states.

The AOH Division 9 organization in the west Bronx was one such group that came together in 1944. Division 9 was located in Highbridge, which was then an Irish neighborhood in an Irish borough. In the Bronx, the Irish-born population grew rapidly from 12,820 in 1900 to a high of 42,709 in 1940. By 1950, the number of all-Irish New Yorkers living in the Bronx rose to twenty-six percent of the population. With their American-born offspring, the Irish American community was a substantial percentage of all the residents of the Bronx. Sacred Heart grammar school had more than two-thousand students in a main building and several annexes (see Feighery, 2010, p. 40 ; see also Feighery, 2011, pp.33–39).

The Division's founding in 1944 proved untimely as many young men in the neighborhood were in the military. But with the end of the war, activities within the Irish community returned to normal, and Division 9 continued to grow. In 1952, the Division bought a building at 152 Union Place off Ogden Avenue for \$10,000. The building consisted of two six-room apartments on the second floor and a large store on the ground floor, which was

Photos:

At left, P. J. Conway's green Walters D/C# accordion which was given to Terry Winch ca. 1980; At right, Terry Winch's first accordion, bought in Manhattan ca. 1954. Courtesy of Terence P. Winch.

Hugh O'Rourke is a former president of the New York Irish History Roundtable and a frequent contributor to New York Irish History. A former professor of criminal justice and a retired New York City Police captain, he was raised in the Bronx and attended Iona College. He is a frequent speaker on the Irish in New York and as of Spring, 2012, he became the Roundtable's Vice President for Local History. ©2012. Published with permission of Hugh E. O'Rourke.

Hibernian All-Accordion Band Dance Feb. 19th

The members of Division Nine Ancient Order of Hibernians of Bronx Co. are continuing their drive for funds to complete equipping their newly formed All-Accordion Band and will hold another Benefit Dance this Saturday night February 19th. The affair will be held in their own hall 167th St. & Ogden Ave. Admission is \$1.50 and refreshments will be on the house. Music will be continuous. In addition to the regular Division orchestra, a special quartet composed of piano, saxophone, banjo, and drums will cater to the needs of the younger guests. The band has practice sessions every Sunday afternoon at 2:00 p.m. at the clubrooms under the direction of a skilled instructor. Accordion players wishing to join the unit should do so at once as all extra uniforms have to be ordered now so that they will be ready before March 17th. The band leads the Division and Ladies Auxiliary up 5th Ave in the Saint Patrick's Day Parade. Anyone wishing information about membership or securing the services of the band should call Arthur McDonnell at CYpress 3-6714.

Illustration:
In 1955, the Irish Advocate published this announcement of a benefit dance for the purpose of more fully equipping the band for its participation in the St. Patrick's Day parade that year. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

Photo:
Arthur McDonnell, with head back, leads practice for the band on a Sunday afternoon in 1956. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

converted to an AOH hall. The Division paid \$5,000 from the treasury and members purchased \$100 bonds to complete the transaction (*Irish Advocate*, November 8, 1952).

An account of the formation of the band in the *Irish Echo* in November, 1954 reported it was modeled after the Pomeroy Accordion Band in Northern Ireland, which was active in nationalist activities in County Tyrone at that time.¹ The original organizers of the Division 9 band seem to have been Jack Fitzgerald, Arthur McDonnell, and P.J. Conway—a noted button accordionist. A dance was held to raise funds for uniforms and instruments. The *Echo* article stated that all were welcome to join in the band. Practice times were listed as every Sunday at 2 p.m. in the Division's hall.

Every band needs a uniform and Division 9 adopted a dark green uniform with a gold stripe down the trousers. The band selected a jacket similar to the popular World War II "Eisenhower" jacket to complete the uniform. A military-style overseas cap with one gold tassel was added. (The tas-

seled cap did not receive total support, and one young member refused to wear the cap in parades.) One former member of the band noted that the Eisenhower jacket was similar to the bus drivers' uniform and seven members of the band were bus drivers, a popular occupation among the Irish civil service-minded residents of the Bronx. While the band was a reflection of the strong Irish culture enjoyed by its members and founders, the band was still influenced by the greater American culture that flourished around it. It added attractive young female drum major-ette, Barbara Smith, to lead it during parades. (Most American brass marching bands had drum majorettes or baton twirlers as leaders, and the AOH Division 9 All-Accordion Band was no exception.)

THE INSTRUMENTS THEY PLAYED

Technical aspects of the band's instruments deserve some attention. Accordions had special characteristics that helped to make marching and playing simultaneously possible. They did not require continual tuning



and were less affected by weather than other instruments. Accordions were easy to carry and perhaps easier to play than some other instruments. While violinists must know what a note sounds like to play it correctly, accordions always sounded the correct note when the required button was played. The Division 9 band was equipped mainly with F.H. Walters or Baldoni-Bartoli diatonic accordions in the key of D and C#. On a



diatonic accordion, sound is made as a button is pressed and air is moved through from one to eight reeds. Diatonic refers to an instrument that can play in one key. Irish button accordions used in the Division's marching band typically had ten buttons in the outside row, which played in the key of D. The inner row or half row, when an instrument was equipped with it, was in the key of C# and was used to sound notes that were not available in the key of D. The introduction of the second row made the button accordion chromatic in that it could play in a variety of keys. (Vallely, 1999, pp. 1–6)

Diatonic accordions were also referred to as being bisonic meaning that the note differed when the note was played on the push or the pull. Diatonic accordions in different keys were popular folk instruments in all European countries. They were simple to play, and musicians need not be expert in musical theory. One could be taught to play a diatonic accordion quickly by someone who had mastered the instrument. Playing the diatonic accordion was usually accomplished by a learning style that emphasized demonstration, imitation, and physical repe-

tition. Memorizing and acquisition of a large repertoire were important parts of the learning process. (Gedutis, 2004, pp. 137–138) A press and draw tablature style that indicated what finger to use on what button dispensed with the necessity to learn to read musical notation.

Many adult members of the Division's band could play accordions when they joined. Most of the adult Irish-born members were self-taught and played by ear. Some younger members learned by taking formal lessons or learned the tunes by rote at the band practices in the Division's hall.

The band marched in the St. Patrick's Day parade in Manhattan and in smaller parades in the surrounding communities. It also entertained at the AOH dances and dinners and was available for hire at any number of events. The band played at the World's Fair in Flushing Meadow Park in the early 1960s and once journeyed to Newport, Rhode Island for a performance. The band usually traveled by rented bus, and in general these excursions were fun for most members.

Photo:
Barbara Smith leads the
band in a 1956
St. Patrick's Day parade.
Photo by Keegan Photos.
Courtesy of John
Fitzgerald.



Photo:
Parading in White
Plains, N.Y., in April,
1956. Band member
Jackie Murphy dis-
liked wearing the
green cap with the
gold tassel. Photo by
Keegan Photos.
Courtesy of John
Fitzgerald.

THE END OF IRISH HIGHBRIDGE AND THE BAND

Community organizations require the support of the larger community, and Bronx history is littered with institutions that have closed due to community changes that have occurred over the years. AOH divisions, Knights of Columbus councils, veterans' organizations, churches, and synagogues have closed throughout the borough as the ethnic composition of the Bronx has changed and different groups and organizations have been developed. There is a lack of agreement on exactly when the Division 9 band was disbanded, and there are no records that discuss why or when the band ceased. In interviewing former band members a variety of reasons have been offered, but a common theme involves the decline of the Irish presence in Highbridge.

In Kathleen Feighery's (2010) excellent study of the Irish in Highbridge, she discusses the ethnic changes and accompanying stresses that developed in the early 1960s. As African-Americans and Hispanics moved into the

neighborhood, conflict developed, often between young Irish-American males and the newcomers. A fight between the two groups in 1963 resulted in arrests of several Irish-American males. The fight made the newspapers and became the talk of the neighborhood (*New York Times*, October 7, 1963). Subsidized housing also came to the neighborhood, bringing large numbers of poorer people, some with different cultures and languages.² And the opening of Co-op City in the East Bronx, with its new and larger apartments among other attractions, also resulted in people leaving the neighborhood. In addition, prosperity among the upwardly mobile American-born children of Irish immigrants allowed them to move to the suburbs, with Rockland County a favored destination.³ As the Irish community moved out of Highbridge, the AOH Division 9 declined—and the All-Accordion Band appears to have disbanded in the early 1960s.

Of course, other reasons also contributed to the demise of the band. Members who joined as boys grew up, and their interests

changed. Jesse and Terry Winch were in grammar school when they joined the band, but by the early 1960s they were students at Iona College and were involved in other activities. Mary Mackessy ended her involvement in the band when she married in 1959. Al Flynn joined the band in 1955 but left in 1959. He was living in Brooklyn at that point, and it was difficult to get to Highbridge for practice.

Most organizations have internal conflicts, and conflict also may have contributed to the demise. Frequently, bands sponsored by parent organizations will often develop goals different from those of parent groups. Most of the Division 9 band members were more interested in the band activities and less interested in the aims of the AOH. For example, in an interview recorded by Terry Winch, P.J. Conway recounted an incident during a New York St. Patrick's Day parade. Apparently, some band members had been celebrating before marching up Fifth Avenue, and their deportment may have left something to be desired. The president of the



AOH Division 9, John Browne, had words with Conway over what Browne considered unacceptable behavior, and at least one band member resigned on the spot. Strained feelings may have continued between members concerned with the Division itself and those members concerned with enjoying the band and activities associated with it.

At about the same time the AOH Division 9 in Highbridge was entering its



Photo (above):
The band participating in a March, 1959 parade. Members shown are (l. to r.): Pat Trainor, unknown, Mary Loftus, Terry Winch, Jimmy McCann, Willie Fox, and Larry Farrell. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

Photo (left):
P.J. Conway, at front on the extreme right, with the band in White Plains, N.Y., during April, 1956. He is playing his F.H. Walters two-row accordion. Photo by Keegan Photos. Courtesy of John Fitzgerald.

decline, another AOH Division 9, this one in Manhattan, was starting its band. The AOH Division 9 in Manhattan was in the nearby heavily Irish American neighborhood of Inwood. In a photo of the new band, several members of the old Highbridge band are clearly to be seen. Were they recruited from the existing band or did they join at the end of the Highbridge band? Unfortunately, a definitive answer is not available. However, it seems that some of the members who joined the Inwood band left the Highbridge band as it was dissolving.

Two musicians who currently teach the button accordion to youths in Pearl River and Yonkers (New York communities with large Irish American populations) were recently presented with a suggestion that starting an accordion band would be good for the young musicians.³ The suggestion was not received favorably. Perhaps the era of the accordion band is gone from New York forever.

Endnotes

- 1 I would like to thank all those who have helped me in researching this article, especially those associated with or the former members of the AOH Division 9 Band: Terence P. Winch; James T. Winch; Felix Dolan; Mary Mackessy Donoghue; Al Flynn; Sean McMahon; John Fitzgerald; Martin Halpin; Frank McKenna (AOH Div. 9 Manhattan); Thomas Beirne (AOH Div. 9 Manhattan). I would also like to thank two experts on the history of the Baldoni-Bartoli and F.H. Walters accordions, Paul Goff, Ph.D. and Ted McGraw. Their assistance was invaluable.
- 2 Police precincts maintain statistics on the ethnic/racial makeup of their areas, and the community-affairs officer for the 44th Precinct, which covers the Highbridge, Mt. Edan, and the Morrisania neighborhoods, recently stated that the precinct's non-Hispanic white population was 1.4% of the total population of 139,563. In effect, as of 2011, there were almost no non-Hispanic whites living in the 44th Precinct.
- 3 In 2011, Pearl River in Rockland County had a large and active AOH hall and the second largest St. Patrick's Day parade in New York State.

Works Cited

- Breathnach, B. (1996). *Folk music and dance of Ireland*. Cork: Ossian.
- Davidson, M. (2005). *Alfred's teach yourself to play accordion*. New York: Alfred Publishing Company.
- Roundtable; Feighery, "Church Influence on Community Life in Highbridge," *New York Irish History*, vol.25 (2011). New York: New York Irish History Roundtable.
- Feighery, K. (2010). "The Streets Were Paved Green, White, and Gold: the heyday of the Irish in Highbridge, 1920–1970." Unpublished master's thesis. New York University. See also Feighery, "The Best Air in the City: Socioeconomics of the Irish in Highbridge, 1920–1960," *New York Irish History*, vol.24 (2010). New York: New York Irish History Roundtable.
- Gedutis, S. (2004). *See you at the hall: Boston's golden era of Irish music and dance*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Irish Advocate*
- Irish Echo*
- Moloney, M. (1992). "Irish music in America: continuity and change." Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Pennsylvania.
- Morrison, J. C. (1931). *The Meisel simplified method: how to play the Globe Accordion*. New York: C. Meisel, Inc.
- O'Brien, Jerry. (1949). *Jerry O'Brien's accordion instructor for the 10 key and 19 key Irish style accordion containing a selection of Irish jigs, reels, hornpipes, polkas, highland flings and waltzes*. Roxbury, MA: E. O'Byrne DeWitt's Sons.
- Smith, G. and M. Brocken. (2005). "Accordion Band," *Continuum encyclopedia of popular music of the world*. vol. 1. New York: Continuum Books.
- Vallery, Fintan, ed. (1999). "Accordion," *The companion to Irish traditional music*. New York: New York University Press.