

Irish Radio Days in New York *1922–1945*

BY JOHN T. RIDGE

In late 1921 the first licensed commercial radio stations began operating in the United States. In a few short years, radio as a means to carry entertainment and information exploded across the country as additional stations signed on almost every day until there were thousands in the United States and dozens in New York City and the surrounding suburbs. For the first time, average Americans could purchase receivers for somewhere between \$6 and \$15, and in one step connect instantaneously with the culture and events going on around them and often far away.

From the first months of radio, Irish music and song were featured in scheduled broadcasts of pioneer stations. There were hundreds of amateur radio stations in the United States and many of them broadcast programs, either live or from records, with any entertainment that was available. In many ways, the birth of radio as a regulated commercial enterprise coincided with the “golden age of Irish traditional music” in America. As a consequence of emigration, New York and a few other cities became home for hundreds of the best players of Irish music, to say nothing of the many fine singers, bringing voices of every range, who sang their way into the hearts of Irish immigrants and their descendants, and into the homes of Americans of many ethnic origins.

Radio Station KDKA in Pittsburgh, which came on the air in late 1920, is widely credited with being the first commercial radio station in America, although there are other claimants to the title. It was soon joined in the following weeks by other stations including WJZ in Newark, which for several months was practically the only radio station serving the metropolitan New York area. By March 1922, dozens of new stations

were added to the greater New York dial, and with this proliferation the need for programming led to Irish music being broadcast on a frequent basis. It was estimated at that time that there were more than 700,000 radio receivers in the United States, mostly built at home by hobbyists, but increasingly manufactured sets began to appear on the market.¹ The most common receiver up to the mid-1920s was the simple crystal set which could only power a pair of headphones, but with the introduction of the vacuum tube that could drive loudspeakers, radios began to appeal to an even wider audience. By 1930, almost thirty million American families had radio sets.²

PIONEERS OF IRISH RADIO IDENTIFIED

In 1943, just over twenty years after radio broadcasts began, Ann Burke McNulty of the popular musical group, the McNulty Family, wrote a letter that appeared in her son Peter’s weekly column in the newspaper, the *Irish Advocate*. She asked the newspapers readers:

I wonder if I may ask the readers of this column for a favor? Could you tell me: Who put on the very first Irish program on the radio in New York, or vicinity, and on what station, in what year, and what month was it broadcast. I would appreciate any “Dissa” and “Datta” you could give me on this subject. I have spoken to at least a dozen people associated with radio, and each one claims that HE was the very first person to broadcast an Irish program. Now, here is where I want to make it clear that we (McNultys) do not claim to be the first to put on an Irish broadcast.³

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Photo: Josephine Patricia Smith with her sister Anna created the program “Rambles in Erin” in 1926, a carefully crafted exposition of ancient and traditional Irish music that was one of the earliest network broadcasts of Irish programming. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

At least two replies to the inquiry appeared shortly afterward in the paper. The first answer came from Thomas G. O’Doherty and was published two weeks later:

As far as I am aware, our mutual friend, Joe White, was the first person to sing Irish songs on the radio. This was way back in the days when WJZ was the only radio station in New York—about 1922.

The first program devoted exclusively to Irish music and songs, was probably “Rambles in Erin” which was inaugurated in the Summer of 1926 and broadcast over WGBS (now WINS). This was the first “group” pro-

gram with continuity and musical backgrounds, etc. The group included Josephine Smith, Anna W. Smith, Helen O’Donnell, Teresa Brayton, and my brother Seamus, who made his radio debut over WEAJ on St. Patrick’s night 1926.

John MacCormack made his first radio appearance over WEAJ on New Year’s Eve, 1924, but I think you can honestly credit Joe White with the honor of the first Irish song on the radio.⁴

Two weeks later, the popular sports columnist and radio announcer “Lefty” Devine contributed his thoughts on Irish firsts in radio:

The first Irish radio program ever heard over the air waves was sponsored by the New York Gaelic Athletic Association in 1924, over the Paulist Fathers' station, WLWL. The sports talk was directed by Bill Magner of Cork, with the Irish dance music supplied by the late Tom Ennis and his Irish Minstrels.⁵

The first pioneers of Irish radio entertainment may not have been noted in any records in radio logs or newspaper reports. Radio in 1922 was not only in its infancy, but it was very chaotic. Programming was only beginning to be planned and only sporadically did the schedules appear in the daily newspapers. Irish music and songs were popular among the general public in the 1920s and broadcasts unrecorded in the press undoubtedly contained Irish selections, but based on published schedules the first broadcast of an Irish song in metropolitan New York was in January, 1922, when singers in St. Aloysius R.C. church in Jersey City sang "When Irish Eyes are Smiling."⁶ Two nights later, again over WNO, Harry Pease, a well-known popular song writer, sang two of his own compositions "Peggy O'Neil" and "Mickey

O'Neil." A short time later, Ned Gifford and a Miss Ford sang in a duet "If I Knew that Ireland Was Free."⁷ On January 31, 1922, Gerald Griffin, a vaudeville performer who billed himself as the successor of Chauncey Olcott, sang "When You and I Were Young Maggie" and "It's Only a Step from Killarney to Heaven." WNO carried his voice for many miles and the station had to contend with many telephone calls asking for encores.⁸

On many of the new stations starting up across the country, there seemed to be an abundance of Irish tenors available, but not everyone was especially pleased as one WNO listener wrote:

As per my phone call last night I wish to congratulate you on your excellent broadcasting. I noticed you took my hint of not playing all "Irish" records. Of course, it was only a suggestion and I am sure you took it good naturedly.⁹

On March 6, 1922, the Timphony Quartet of New York became the first group of singers to perform over the air when they sang "Peggy O'Neil" over WJZ. A few days later on March 13, P. J. Murtagh, "late of the Strand Quartet," sang "My Wild Irish Rose" over the same station.¹⁰

Illustration:

Concert tenor Tom Egan was the head of the Irish Music Foundation which sought to present a more traditional aspect of Irish music and song in the first years of radio.

Courtesy of John T. Ridge.





On March 17, 1922 two separate programs were transmitted over WJZ Newark and WYCB, Bedloe's Island (Liberty Island), the station of the Army Signal Corps. Beginning at 8 p.m. the program on WJZ featured James R. Caffrey of Newark in a selection of Irish ballads. Just after 9 o'clock, WYCB broadcast John Valentine and his accompanist Madeline Raymond in a selection of songs that included "The Minstrel Boy" and "Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms." A Miss Kemper later joined Valentine in singing "Kathleen Mavourneen."¹¹

In 1922 there were few radio stations audible in the New York City area. At mid-year, there were only about a half dozen transmitters in the metropolitan area and perhaps another dozen that could be heard from other cities at night. Nevertheless, it was probably the only time in the history of America's broadcasting industry that Irish programming was something that could be counted on the air-

waves every couple of days or so. Within a few week period in the Spring of 1922, the *New York Times* mentioned the following performances all over WJZ Newark alone: a recital by Maria Schupac of Irish songs, Frank O'Neil and his brother Emmet in Irish songs and dramatic readings, Pauline Jennings singing "Murty Kerrigan," Floyd Shafto of the Presbyterian Church of New York singing Chauncey Olcott favorites, James F. O'Neil, the Irish-American dramatic lyric tenor and Rose E. Clark rendering "An Irish Love Song."¹²

Joseph White, the "Silver Masked Tenor," made his debut on radio over WJZ July 4, 1922 in a concert of John McCormack standards that included "The Snowy Breasted Pearl" and "Tis an Irish Girl I Love." His program was billed as a concert and was half an hour in length. All his songs appear to have been Irish, so perhaps a claim can still be made for Joseph White as the first individual to have a complete Irish radio program.¹³ McCormack

Photo:

Seamus O'Doherty, an Irish-born tenor and scholar of Irish music and song, was the husband of Josephine Patricia Smith and sang many of Ramble's selections, many of them re-discovered during research in Europe during the summer months. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

himself did not make his debut over the radio until New Year's Day, 1925.¹⁴

THE CLASSIC TOUCH

Early radio was dominated by soloist tenors, baritones and sopranos who appeared at the microphone usually accompanied by a pianist. The repertoire followed a familiar theme when it came to Irish music, either classics of the Thomas Moore genre, John McCormack popularized tunes or from the vaudeville stage of the Chauncey Olcott variety. A movement started to develop within the Irish community to make the music more authentic to Ireland's traditions. The Irish Music Foundation, under the direction of Thomas Egan, a singer and stage performer himself, broadcast an announcement on March 17, 1922, of its plan for "the perpetuation of Irish music."¹⁵ The group sought to "foster ancient Irish folk songs," specifically in the Irish language, through performances of the opera "Muirgheas" by O'Brien Butler and the opera "Eithne" by Robert O'Dwyer. A year later on St. Patrick's Day, 1923, WEAF broadcast excerpts of the Butler piece, dubbed "Ireland's only opera," featuring Egan and Mme. Lilian Breton in selections of song, some in duet.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the operas were never completely performed. Egan became embroiled in a legal dispute with the Pathe Company that hampered the society's progress and died suddenly while on tour in San Francisco in 1925. With his death the plans of the Irish Music Foundation foundered.¹⁷

In 1926, however, a new program, "Rambles in Erin," appeared on the airwaves and for many years served as the gold standard for what was best in Irish music and culture. The program was the product of three individuals, sisters Anna Winifred Smith and Josephine Patricia Smith, and Josephine's husband, tenor Seamus O'Doherty whose total of eighty-six recordings even exceeded the number made by the great John McCormack. Each show was carefully scripted and only came to radio in a



Photo:
Piper Eddie Burke from Co. Roscommon played a family heirloom set of 200-year old pipes, handed down from generation to generation, over New York radio in the mid-1920s. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

series run of approximately twenty weeks at a time. In the interim, the three with a few other passionate lovers of Irish music would craft a program of music, song, Irish history and lore, much of it in the Irish language. Most important to the program were the annual summer trips to Ireland as was reported in 1932:

In a short time the "Rambles in Erin" program directed for the past six years by Anna Winifred Smith, will again be heard on the air. Miss Smith returns from a summer spent in rambling in Erin, with a store of precious material for use in the new series. She has brought back with her a rare collection of ancient legends, songs and stories.

Miss Josephine Smith has, during the summer, arranged many old Gaelic airs that will enhance these programs. Since many of these old airs she has collected, were written especially for the harp, she has taken up the study of this glorious instrument. The harp in her possession is a famous old Irish harp which was presented to



her by a very dear Irish friend.

While in Ireland Miss Anna W. Smith met statesmen, dramatists, poets and artists, and was present at the special session of the Dail, attended Gaelic festivals and Gaelic competitions in story-telling, Irish language and Irish folk dancing. In the interest of these programs, Miss Smith was afforded every opportunity of visiting the most historic places.¹⁸

O'Doherty was a veteran, surprisingly, of the vaudeville stage in Belfast, but developed a scholar's interest in the history and origins of Irish music, compiling a large library of learned works. Individual programs often followed a particular theme such as the life of St. Brigid, Irish soldiers in Washington's Army, the Easter Rising or seasonal topics such as a Christmas show in 1930:

The Christmas program will feature songs and carols of the Irish peo-

ple that were never before heard in America. Seamus O'Doherty, recording Irish tenor, will introduce an ancient carol in the Gaelic language entitled "Tuirne Maire," meaning "Mary's Spinning Song." Anna Winifred Smith will narrate the old customs and stories of the Irish Christmas season. Josephine Smith, pianist, will play some choice old melodies that are certain to revive memories of Christmas in Ireland.¹⁹

The "Rambles in Erin" program at one point was heard on a network of 126 stations throughout the U.S. and Canada, but after the death of Anna in 1942 there were only occasional programs transmitted. Josephine Patricia Smith continued to write a regular column for Irish weekly papers like the *Irish Advocate* that, if it had been published as a collection, would be one of the most outstanding expositions of the history and development of Irish music and song.

Photo:

The Waterford-born Flanagan Brothers, pictured in 1926 (with one brother not present) broadcast over many local stations including WNYC. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

One of the last “Rambles in Erin” shows was actually a made-for-television revival in 1966, but in an interview in 1962 O’Doherty admitted that “Irish music had declined since its peak in the 1920s” thanks to “a proportionate decrease in Irish immigration to this country and in changing tastes on the part of the non-Irish public.” In the age of modern music, he made the following prediction:

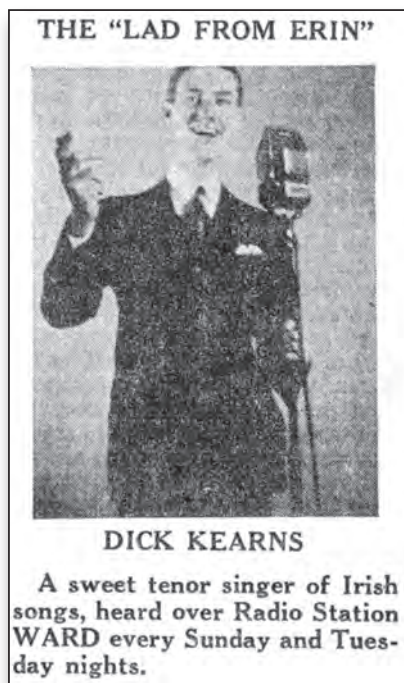


Illustration:
Dick Kearns was just one of dozens of singers who appeared over the Irish radio programs in the 1930s. Only a few of them would establish a regular following. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

“Nobody is ever going to forget a lovely melody combined with words that express an honest depth of feeling,” he declared.

How does rock n’ roll fit into the picture?

“It’s an expression of the times and will pass.” He said, “Fifty years from now they’ll still be singing ‘Where the River Shannon Flows’ when the noise of rock n’ roll has died down to a rattle.”²⁰

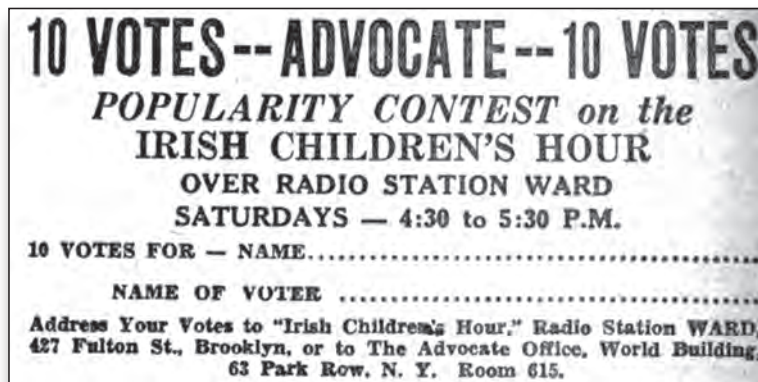
INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN THE AIR

The earliest New York broadcast of instrumental Irish music was made over WJZ, Newark, on March 17, 1922. A selection of Irish airs was played by the Benevolent

Protective Order of Elks Band of that city, but no record survives of exactly what was played survives.²¹ During 1922, traditional Irish music by Irish musicians was occasionally played over several transmitters outside the New York City area such as KDKA Pittsburgh, WGY Schenectady and KYW, then in Chicago, but the earliest specifically mentioned broadcast of traditional Irish music on a New York City area station did not come until March 17, 1923, when Anna Kelly and Mary Norton played Irish jigs over WHN, then located in Ridgewood, Queens.²² On October 3, 1923, Herborn and Bolger did an accordion and piano duet over WOR, then in Newark. Eddie Herborn was a popular performer at Celtic Park and at this time had four records of solo performances of jigs and reels on sale at such stores as O’Byrne DeWitt in Manhattan.²³

During the second half of the decade of the 1920s, more and more genuinely traditional Irish music made its way to the New York airwaves. The uilleann pipes, perhaps for reasons related to audio quality, were featured many times with the broadcasts of pipers Eddie Burke (1925), sixteen year-old Jimmy McLoughlin (1925), Ed Haile (1928) and Michael Gallagher (1928). Eddie Burke, a bricklayer from Co. Roscommon, was on the radio most frequently, almost weekly over WBEJ in 1925. He played a pair of pipes over two-hundred years old that had been handed down from one generation to the next in his family.²⁴ Some of the first Irish bagpipe bands in the city, the Irish Pipers Band and the Emmet Irish Pipers, began occasional broadcasts in 1929.²⁵

For most of the 1920s when Irish traditional artists appeared on radio it was to fill in small time slots on the radio station’s schedule. In 1925, a musical group called the Irish Minstrels occupied a ten-minute spot over WNYC, the city-owned station.²⁶ Pat Lynch, born in Co. Clare, won a following across the U.S. and Canada over powerful WJZ in 1926 playing his accordion and plugging his own records.²⁷ The most popu-



lar traditional Irish group in this period was the Flanagan Brothers Trio. The group not only played very accomplished traditional jigs, reels and hornpipes, but were masters of variety and comic songs. The Flanagans had a forty-five-minute program over Manhattan's WGBS, a station that began to feature many Irish programs.²⁸ Moving to WNYC in 1927, they were favorably reviewed by the *Brooklyn Eagle* which noted especially "their irresistible jigs and reels that remind one of the palmy days of Shorty Casey's place on Coney Island's Bowery."²⁹ After a St. Patrick's program in 1928, again over WNYC, the *Brooklyn Eagle* observed:

*These delightful old buckos, the Flanagan Brothers, were on hand and contributed two characteristic numbers. The first was a song called "Cod Liver Oil" that was as old-fashioned as last year's bonnet, but none the less amusing on that account. The second offering of the Flanagans was a dialogue in which they impersonated two fine lads from the "ould sod" watching a St Patrick's Day parade. It was full of natural Celtic humor.*³⁰

SPONSORING THE SHOWS

In 1928, the first radio shows appeared that were organized by local Irish individuals: Phil Kyne's "Irish Hour" over WBBC in Brooklyn and two programs that were sponsored by New York Irish travel agents. Peter Conlon, considered to be one of the best traditional accordion players who ever lived, was given his own program sponsored by

the McGovern Brothers Travel Bureau. The McGoverns, who were immigrants from Co. Leitrim, had a number of successful commercial enterprises in Brooklyn, and cleverly used Conlon to promote their excursion to Ireland during that summer:

*You have just heard Pete Conlon and his orchestra give a selection of Irish airs. Mr. Conlon is in the first rank among accordion players. Mr. Conlon and his orchestra are going to Ireland with the personally conducted excursion organized by the McGovern Brothers Travel Service Bureau. Those who would like to accompany them should apply to the McGovern Brothers Travel Bureau for further particulars.*³¹

Another travel agent broadcast was sponsored by Stephen Gilrane, steamship agent, who doubled as the program's announcer. Gilrane was from Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim and had a musical background having had his own Irish band before the First World War. He branched out in the 1920s as a promoter of Irish dance halls including Koch's Hall, a favorite with new immigrant Irish in that era and in smaller halls as far afield as Broad Channel. Gilrane's Irish Hour ran from 1928 until at least 1931 when it switched to WEVD.³²

It was advertisers like the travel agents who specialized in the Irish immigrant and visitor trade that kept the Irish radio shows on the air. Occasionally, live broadcasts, as Irish radio show host James Hayden reported, were sent out from the ships at the pier:

Illustration:

An afternoon program especially for children featured amateur performances of young Irish-Americans. Listeners had a chance to vote on their favorites. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

*The Ss. Lancastrina of the Cunard Line was the scene of an Irish radio program over Station WLWL. The broadcast featured John Foley's County Roscommon Boys' Orchestra, with George O'Brien, Irish tenor. The writer was extended an invitation to witness the broadcast. We responded, with the result we had a very pleasant evening on board. After a rehearsal a seven-course dinner was served to all present and at 7:30 the program went on the air and reports have it that very seldom has a better Irish program been broadcast.*³³

The Irish radio shows competed with the three weekly Irish New York newspapers for advertising that was in relatively short supply. Consequently, it was a curious patch of advertisers such as dentists, doctors, opticians, tailors and dance halls that kept the broadcasts on the air. In the era of live broadcasts of entertainers and bands, radio hosts also arranged studio broadcasts where spectators paid fifty cents a head to enjoy the performance. James Hayden regularly put together a radio show troupe that made the circuit of the city's Irish neighborhoods allowing listeners the chance, in many cases for the first time, to see their "stars" in person, but the radio announcers like Hayden had to scramble to keep a program going:

*Speaking of radio programs and how they are kept on the air. No broadcast can remain permanent on the air unless sponsored. They may, in some cases, be sustained for a while until such time as they are. On our broadcast every Sunday there are several announcements made. These are paid for, and in advance of that. . . Some complain of too much advertising. This can't be helped as the sponsors pay a pretty good price. This writer in his spare time secures paid announcements that help to keep those Irish broadcasts on the air.*³⁴

By the early 1930s, Irish programming was less common on the more powerful New York area stations and largely moved to the right side of the radio dial where signals tended to be weak and ethnic broadcasts dominant. Stations like WARD came with their own advertisers from outside of the Irish community, especially the tailoring and clothing firms, who were in direct competition with well-known Irish tailors. A live broadcast over WARD in 1934 could nevertheless be a grand event:

*A monster double radio show and ball will take place on next Thursday night, April 5, at the New Palm Garden on West Fifty-second street near Eighth Avenue, under the direction of the radio announcer with the friendly voice, Judge Gustam. He invites you to come and see stars from Radio Station WARD and watch them as they broadcast from the stage, just as they do from the studio. He also wants to meet you personally. The entire auditorium will be wired, with microphones on the stage and sound devices throughout the audience. It is a real radio show, with Jack Murphy and his "Ireland's Own" orchestra and one hundred and fifty popular entertainers, including the Walsh Brothers and Kitty Creed. Mr. and Mrs. Judge Gustam will present a one-act comedy, entitled "The Bargain Fiend," a scream from start to finish. In the Popularity Contest for men a suit of clothes will be given away, to the lady a silver fox neckpiece and to the child a loving cup.*³⁵

CONTROVERSIES

James Hayden began an Irish radio show in 1928 and while not the first to have a regular show, he certainly soon dominated the Irish ethnic airwaves, eventually offering a Sunday night "Two Hours in Erin" program as well as shorter nightly programs during the week. In 1931, he broadcast the first Irish show ever to be transmitted over television:

ON IRISH NIGHT RADIO PROGRAM IN
ROCKAWAY THIS FRIDAY NIGHT



HELEN SAVAGE, Talented Irish Step Dance Instructor
and Entertainer

The program known as the Irish Echo Boys, with James Hayden, as master of ceremonies, has been moved to the television studios in response to numerous requests by those desiring to see these entertainers in their native costumes and to see and hear their native instruments. The program goes on the air weekly over WGBS and W2XCR each Sunday night at 6:30 p.m. From time to time celebrated Irish singers and musicians visiting New York are included in these programs.³⁶

Although James Hayden's radio program

often featured some of the elite of Irish traditional musicians, he also presented a wide variety of entertainers, many of whom were little more than good amateurs. But this was not particularly the case with his children's program which was entirely composed of young Irish-Americans playing instruments or dancing to reels and jigs. Periodically, contests were run for the best of these young performers, who were voted on by readers clipping ballots from the Irish weekly newspaper, the *Irish Advocate*, or by calling the radio station. It was not surprising that programs like Hayden's, although extremely popular with the Irish community, nevertheless stirred up criticism from those who thought that the quality of Irish music was being compromised. This situation continued until 1937 when union organizing efforts brought most of the better Irish bands into Local 802 AFL, making the cost of providing most professional live musical broadcasts over the radio prohibitive.³⁷ The shows became more amateur, but this is not what the audience wanted to hear.

William P. Quinn was an Irish-born band leader in the 1930s who later, at the end of World War II, conducted his own traveling Irish radio show over the R.K.O. circuit in the city's Irish neighborhoods. In 1939, Quinn put together a radio program over WINS financed entirely from the advertising of Irish-owned businesses. He seemed to be directing remarks against James Hayden in a 1945 column in the *Irish Advocate* when he wrote:

A few years ago a remark passed by one of our radio program directors made me think up an idea. The remark was made to make the Irish people very cheap; it was a man who was born in Ireland that passed the remark. His sponsors were not Irish, and he was peeved because they did not go with him on the radio. A few

Illustration:

Helen Savage, a performer in the Hayden troupe, later branched out with her own shows in which she played a prominent part along with students from her singing and dancing schools.

Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

*did but only because there was no other program at the time. If his program was called an Irish Amateur program they might have advertised, but they would not go ahead with what was being sold to the public as an Irish radio program, and I would not blame them because in plain facts it was a disgrace.*³⁸

If listeners were upset with Hayden over his radio broadcasts, it didn't seem to affect his popularity. In the summertime, he moved to a hotel in Rockaway's Irishtown and then used his radio broadcasts as a means to advertise the entertainment at the local Irish dance halls. Thousands of Irish learned about Irish Rockaway through his comments on his show and they flocked to the "Irish Riviera." Hayden wrote in 1932:

This writer stood at the corner of Beach 103rd Street and the Boulevard, in front of our domicile (The Central), and it was nothing but greeting after greeting, hand shake after hand shake, and my Lord, the many "helloes!" We never experienced anything like it. Sunday afternoon was a "knockout" on that same corner, "The Crossroad of Ireland." It was a traffic jam on the sidewalk. Officer Maloney, on the crossing, yelled out: "Hayden, you're blocking traffic." It was just as well that I had to go to the radio station. We were back again at 7:30 p.m. and every resort along Seaside Avenue from Seaside Station to the Boardwalk was crowded. Irish orchestras could be heard in all directions—The Pride of Erin Seaside Ballroom, the Leitrim House, Farrell and Moriarty's Montauk Inn, Erin's Seaside Inn—boy, what a lively place—the Roscommon House with Barney Lavin and Michael Caufield; the Clare House, Gilfeather's Sligo Hotel, Mayo-Erin's Isle, the Dublin Hotel,

*Jack O'Connell's on the same street, Brennan's House, the Killarney House on the Boulevard and Beach 102nd Street; the same to be said for Beach 107th Street, where Reilly's Hotel, the Breffni House (P.J. Murphy and Tim Finucane), Peter Shea's, Geaney and Murphy's Shamrock House—crowds everywhere. We must repeat again that we never saw anything like it. What a list I could print of the people we met on the corner of the Boulevard and Beach 103rd Street alone. Every hotel and rooming house was crowded.*³⁹

CREATING IRISHMEN

Radio was so powerful a voice in the Irish community that it virtually created Irishmen. Judge Gustam (he never sat on the bench—his name was "Augustus Judge Gustam") was one of the staff announcers on WARD and co-hosted the Hayden program. Gustam was born in Brooklyn of old stock American origins and had had a career on the stage and as a successful real estate salesman in Flatbush until the Depression burst the economic bubble. With his wife Ida, the couple was quickly absorbed into the Irish community and in the next few years not only did they have their own Irish radio show, but Gustam wrote a weekly column for the *Irish Advocate*. The social world of the Irish drew them in and they journeyed, usually in the company of Hayden or Irish performers, to do personal appearances or perform in charity events for Irish and Catholic causes. In his life, he had experienced good and hard times where a can of beans, and sometimes not even that, was all his wife and himself had to eat. He wrote prophetically in 1935:

...and finally, radio...radio...But I wonder if radio is final? They are whispering that it may not...oh, well, if that means hard times again for me I can face them...I've learned how in fifty years and I've learned this...A man can face anything if standing by his side

*is a faithful wife... You know, don't you old timers?*⁴⁰

When WARD was consolidated with three other Brooklyn stations, Gustam was just another unemployed radio announcer who had to leave the city for cheaper accommodations on Long Island. A similar fate awaited WARD announcer Bruce Henry, another individual without any Irish background who had been absorbed into the Irish radio world in the late 1930s. He was later in 1940 the co-host of a radio show along with orchestra leader Happy O'Brien and sports columnist "Lefty" Devine over WNEW, sponsored by Barney's, the clothing store. Henry was a piano player on the radio and at Irish cabarets like the Leitrim House and O'Reilly's on Third Avenue. He performed on radio and stage with the McNulty Family, Helen Savage, and Mary and Mickey Carton. By 1948 however, it was reported he was a "very sick man now, and will be unable to work." The Irish community, including many of his radio stars, quickly rallied to stage a testimonial on his behalf at the Star O'Munster Ballrooms in the Bronx, just as he had for many years donated his efforts to raise funds and do performances at charitable institutions.⁴¹

DRAMATIC CHANGES

The consolidation of four Brooklyn radio stations, including WARD, into one in 1941 was a disaster for Irish radio in New York. Radio time rose dramatically to \$10 a minute or \$102 for a half hour, but no pay for the young musicians and performers, only a mere plug as to where they were performing. The old stations broadcast their own individual Irish programs, but after the merger there was only one program left featuring live Irish music—James Hayden's "Two Hours in Ireland." The other programs, those that remained, featured phonograph records. Staff musicians, who were not Irish, often appeared on the "canned" Irish programs, sometimes using false Irish names. Irish busi-

nessman Alexander F. Cashin addressed the issue in a letter to the *Irish Advocate*:

We want Irish programs, we want the kind we can welcome into our homes, we want artists to use their own voices—not an exaggerated imitation of the stage Irishman's brogue of forty years ago. The entertainer's right name should be announced, no Irish names should be given to non-Irish musicians or performers.

We want real live flesh and blood Irish talent on Irish radio programs and since we have heard the radio station, allowing for overhead, depreciation, etc., is making good money; we believe that as those entertaining us are in truth station assets, they should be paid directly for their services.

*The radio stations sells an Irish program to one or more business men who advertise their work—does it not seem reasonable that the artists be paid. Who would listen to radio advertising on an Irish program without Irish entertainment. NOT ME.*⁴²

World War II made dramatic changes on the Irish community of New York. In addition to extending the almost complete decline of Irish immigration caused by the Depression, radio audiences were reduced by the many individuals who were serving in the military and away from the city. By the time Irish immigration was resumed in the late 1940s after an almost twenty-year interruption, the pattern of large-scale Irish emigration had already shifted away from the United States. Some New York politicians were quick to assess the decline in the number of Irish, particularly after Bill O'Dwyer's initial election loss in his bid for mayor in 1941. Pay-back may have come for the Irish in the change of programming that took place over the city station WNYC:

If they would take the City Radio Station and discard it, it should save our tax payers a considerable sum. At

Photo:

A temporary cemetery placard marks the location of the Irwin family grave site in Queens' Calvary Cemetery. Author's Collection.

one time we could always hear an Irish program on it once or twice a week, but there is nothing doing along these lines since this [LaGuardia] administration took over. Nevertheless, we could demand one as a public service, because the station belongs to us, just as anyone else. Besides, the mayor was getting just as much publicity riding fire trucks—and it did not cost us so much.⁴³

The late 1920s and the early 1930s was the height of Irish Radio in New York. What followed after World War II proved to be only a poor reflection of those days in the number and hours of Irish programming.

Endnotes

- 1 *Jersey Journal*, March 15, 1922
- 2 *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Population*, Volume VI, Government Printing Office, Washington 1933
- 3 *Irish Advocate*, February 25, 1943
- 4 *Irish Advocate*, March 13, 1943. Joe White, a gifted Irish tenor known as the “Silver Masked Tenor.” was born in Manhattan of Irish parents. He created a sensation as a young soloist at age 10 at the Paulist Church on West 59th Street.
- 5 *Irish Advocate*, March 27, 1943
- 6 *Jersey Journal*, January 25, 1922. Many people would argue over whether or not the Tin Pan Alley song of “When Irish Eyes are Smiling” should be even included in the category of Irish song. WNO Jersey City had made its inaugural broadcast “only on January 19th.”
- 7 *Jersey Journal*, January 27, 1922. Pease wrote other musical pieces for the stage like “Pretty Kitty Kelly.”
- 8 *Jersey Journal*, February 1, 1922
- 9 *Jersey Journal*, January 26, 1922. The letter came from Emil P. Herrman preferred dance music.
- 10 *Jersey Journal*, March 6, 1922 and March 13, 1922
- 11 *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 17, 1922. A year later, Caffrey was performing at Luna Park, Coney Island “after appearing in concerts all over the country.”
- 12 *New York Times*, April 24, May 3, May 15, May 27, June 1 and June 14, 1922
- 13 *New York Times*, July 4, 1922 and *Times Union* (Albany), August 23, 1930. Joseph White used a silver mask in his early career that created an aura of mystery about him; some speculated that he was really John McCormack. When he removed the mask to begin a concert tour, the allure of the unknown was also gone and his popularity waned. He remained a favorite with the New York Irish community into the 1940s.
- 14 *Hammonsport Herald* and *Bath Plaindealer*, February 4, 1931
- 15 *New York Tribune*, March 17, 1922
- 16 *Niagara Falls Gazette*, March 16, 1923 and *Standard Union* (Brooklyn), March 11, 1923. The radio broadcast was set up to be received at the old homes of the two opera composers in Dublin before a small audience. O’Brien Butler had died in 1915 aboard the Lusitania.
- 17 *New York Times*, January 23, 1925
- 18 *Irish Advocate*, October 1, 1932
- 19 *Irish Advocate*, December 20, 1930, John Costello column. The show often included visiting Irish artists as well as regular performers such as Irish-American Rita McLoughlin, Westmeath-born Mae Behan and Louth-born Julia Rooney Lennon. Ann Winifred Smith, widely recognized for her “brilliant intellect,” died in August 1942 and was a tremendous loss to the show. Thereafter, “Rambles in Erin” appeared on the air only sporadically and later shows were specials very similar to the format of the original series.
- 20 *Long Island Star-Journal*, June 5, 1962
- 21 *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 12, 1922 *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 12, 1922
- 22 *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 17, 1923
- 23 *Brooklyn Eagle*, October 3, 1923. Herborn was born in Manhattan of a German-born father and an Irish mother. He was still playing in 1945 at “Ireland’s 32” cabaret in Manhattan and died in Brooklyn, aged 66, 1963. Both Herborn and accordionist John Kimmel, who was completely of German descent,

- were star attractions at Celtic Park. Kimmel made some of the first phonograph records of Irish traditional music.
- 24 *Irish Advocate*, February 28, 1925. Burke was popularly known as the “Cloonfad Piper” and had known many of the great pipers in New York in an earlier generation including Patsy Twohey, and Michael Carney. Martin Beirne, band leader of the popular orchestra called the “Irish Blackbirds,” also played the pipes on the air into the 1930s. A rare example of an actual broadcast by his band of traditional musicians can be heard via a search at [www YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com) for Fred Allen’s St. Patrick’s Day program in 1937. The Beirne selections are at about 53:24 into the recording.
- 25 *Irish Advocate*, March 19 and May 2, 1929
- 26 *Evening Star* (Washington), January 27, 1925
- 27 *Irish Advocate*, March 17, 1926 and April 17, 1926
- 28 *Brooklyn Eagle*, June 8 and October 20, 1926
- 29 *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 1, 1927
- 30 *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 15, 1928
- 31 *Irish Advocate*, May 12, 1928
- 32 *New York Times*, January 19, 1928 and *Irish Advocate*, April 19, 1931
- 33 *Irish Advocate*, September 3, 1932
- 34 *Irish Advocate*, February 3, 1934. The lack of available medical care in early twentieth-century rural Ireland, particularly dental care, attracted a number of non-Irish advertisers to the radio who realized that Irish immigrants constituted a large pool of needy customers.
- 35 *Irish Advocate*, March 31, 1934
- 36 *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 19, 1931. The system was rather primitive, but the low image picture was functional.
- 37 *Irish Advocate*, February 15, 1936, April 3, 1941, and November 28, 1941. Members of the Irish Musicians Federation joined Local 802 bringing a higher scale of wages into play that became even higher in wartime. James Hayden was born in Ballyraggett, Co. Kilkenny. He was described in 1941 as “the columnist, radio announcer and all around good fellow who has from time to time given loyal services to all charities for many years.” Besides his traveling Irish show on the R.K.O. circuit, he conducted two excursions to Ireland composed of his listeners. In 1940, he switched to a shorter program over WEVD where after his death in 1943 his daughter, Dorothy Hayden Cudahy, took over until her retirement in the 1980s. Dorothy continued the traveling stage shows for a while into the early 1950s. William P. Quinn also had a troupe making the Irish neighborhood circuit at about the same time.
- 38 *Irish Advocate*, February 25, 1945. Quinn was writing in the *Irish Advocate*. James Hayden had switched his column to the rival *Irish World* in the late 1930s.
- 39 *Irish Advocate*, July 8, 1932
- 40 *Irish Advocate*, February 16, 1935
- 41 *Irish Advocate*, December 14, 1940, August 21, 1948 and September 18, 1948
- 42 *Irish Advocate*, June 7, 1941
- 43 *Irish Advocate*, April 7, 1945, William P. Quinn column. By 1948, a program called “Songs of the Gael” produced by Josephine Patricia Smith and Seamus O’Doherty had returned to the air over WNYC every Sunday at 5:30 p.m.