

New York Irish Seaside Resorts

BY JOHN T. RIDGE



Photo:
A stereoscopic view of playful New Yorkers on the beach at Rockaway in 1903. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

As long as they have been present in New York, summer has been a special season for Irish immigrants and their descendants. Hardly a greater weather contrast could be found for any immigrant group as the Irish experienced in their new city. They learned they had exchanged a cool, wet July and August in the old country for an often times insufferably humid and deadly inferno when New York's seasonal weather pattern was at its worst. Relief was sought at the shore in common with the native inhabitants and the resulting summertime influx into a few select beach areas created small Irish colonies, some of which today are almost completely forgotten. A short history of four of these once Irish-dominated coastal refuges has been described in this article. Of course, there were many other areas where the Irish flocked to in the summer that are not covered here like Clason Point, Long Beach, and a few shore communities along the Jersey

Shore that deserve to have their story told sometime in the future.

CONEY ISLAND

While Coney Island is the oldest resort in the city, it always had a relatively small Irish presence in comparison to its much smaller neighbor, the Rockaways.

It was going strong as a bathing and entertainment resort long before the area became a part of the City of New York in 1898. Originally, it was part of one of the Village of Gravesend, a rough and tumble place famous for scandal and corruption. Archbishop Corrigan of New York soon after the acquisition of the section to the city endorsed a plan to convert the area into a public park. In a letter to the Parks Commissioner, the Archbishop wrote:

I heartily applaud the project of converting Coney Island into a city park, not only because it would add vastly to the beauty of the city, but especially with

*a view of removing moral dangers and making wise provision for the comfort and proper recreation of our people.*¹

While it was more likely Protestant clergy who dedicated their Sunday sermons to condemning depravity in Coney Island, the Roman Catholic Church quietly urged its adherents to avoid the side of the island where the most offensive entertainment was centered.

Whether or not this was the reason why there were relatively few Irish places of amusement in Coney Island, the resort developed with a dearth of Irish amusements in sharp contrast to profusion of Irish hotels, taverns and dance halls in Rockaway. While there always seemed to be at least one place where the Irish gathered in Coney Island, there was no “Irish Town” or concentration of Irish businesses in this seaside resort. Nevertheless, there were a number of spots with Irish connections.

The western tip of Coney Island is still known as Norton’s Point after Co. Galway-born businessman, State Senator and City Alderman Michael Norton (1835–1888) who kept a hotel here for many years at this promi-

nent headland of New York harbor. New York politicians who frequented the hotel were not always on their best behavior. The often negative reputation of Coney Island did not, however, keep Irish Land reformer and nationalist politician Michael Davitt from spending several days at one of the hotels in 1882 during the height of the Irish land crisis. Day tripping was far more common among visitors than extended stays.²

Paddy Shea’s Irish House began on Coney Island’s Bowery in 1890. The Lowell, Massachusetts born Shea provided his customers with a simple formula, “Irish jigs, Irish food, Irish waiters and Irish music.”³ It was at Shea’s that John Kimmel, one of the pioneers of Irish music on the accordion and among the earliest to appear on a record, made his debut in 1893 and 1894.⁴ The Celtic House was in 1916 a short lived establishment run by two recent Irish immigrants opposite Feltman’s Restaurant. It promised dancing and singing every afternoon and evening as well as step dancing exhibitions by two of the best dancers of the day, Tommy Hill and Jimmy



Illustration:

“Shooting the Chutes” was a ride developed in 1895 by Kildare-born Paul Boyton in Coney Island that revolutionized the amusement-park world. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

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Egan. The Celtic House quickly disappeared from the scene.⁵

It was not only hotels and public houses with Irish connections. An immigrant from Rathangan, Co. Kildare, Paul Boyton, was perhaps more than any other linked with the development of Coney Island and the invention of amusement park rides. His aquatic "Shoot the Chutes" ride was an immediate success and spread throughout the world as the prototype amusement park ride.

In 1895, he established Sea Lion Park, a sixteen acre attraction, that was the first park to charge a single admission price at the gate, enabling all those to ride any ride as many times as they wanted. He worked closely with others to develop amusement park rides and concepts and was particularly close with the Tilyou Family, maternally of Irish descent, the founders of Steeplechase Park.⁶

During the 1920s, a few new Irish venues continued to pop up in Coney Island, the most notable of them was Irish Danceland Park, Twentieth Street and Surf Avenue. It was a gigantic dance pavilion with an open air garden attached and could accommodate 3,500 people. Despite bringing in top Irish orchestras and entertainers from Manhattan, the facility lasted, apparently, just a single season.⁷ Lane's Irish House opened about 1925 on the Bowery and featured Irish singing and dancing acts. Lane's survived until the early 1950s.⁸ Perhaps the last of the Irish entertainment spots to be founded was the Shamrock Irish House in 1936 and was located at

Henderson Walk and the Bowery. While advertising itself as the "home of jigs and reels," it presented a somewhat culturally mixed bag that included tap dancers and a Spanish Rumba dancer in addition to Irish accordion and fiddle players. What set it apart was the facility by 1943 was completely air conditioned. In 1947, She's Irish House, renamed the Killarney Irish House, caught fire and spread quickly to the adjacent Shamrock Irish House destroying them both completely.⁹

In 1929, years before the passing of the Killarney and Shamrock Houses, the *Brooklyn Eagle* was already commenting on the demise of things Irish in Coney Island:

*Prohibition may have knocked saloons out of business and sent bartenders into oblivion, but it is yet to go a long, long way before it will knock the gayety and spontaneity out of the few remaining Irish restaurants with singing waiters, which are still to be found in the environs of Coney Island. Once upon a time there were many Irish restaurants on the island, but Prohibition and other things soon drove them out. These few struggled on.*¹⁰

The *Brooklyn Eagle* went on:

And if you care to see the Irish at their best the only place to watch then is in an Irish Inn among the Irish singing waiters. An older crowd frequents it. It is nothing strange to observe 70 and

*Illustration:
The Shamrock
Irish House in
1943 was one of
the last Irish
entertainment
spots in Coney
Island. Courtesy of
John T. Ridge.*

SATURDAY, JULY 24, 1943

7th YEAR AT CONEY ISLAND
THE PLAYGROUND OF THE WORLD

Shamrock Irish House

HENDERSON WALK and BOWERY
IRISH—AMERICAN DANCING—MUSIC

ATTRactions FOR 1943 SEASON

<p>GEORGE QUINN, Popular Irish Accordion Player PAT McDERMOTT, Irish Tap Dancer, 30 years at Coney Island. JOHN MURPHY, Irish-American Fiddler</p>	<p>EDDIE CASTY, The Singing Bartender LILA CASANOVA, Spanish Rumba Dancer SINGING TRIO — THREE PRETTY MAIDS WITH LOTS OF HARMONY MARTIN BOOKSTON AT THE NOVACHORD</p>
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<p>20 ENTERTAINING WAITERS EVERY A FULL MOMENT - NO COVER CHARGE AT ANY TIME - 500 SEATING CAPACITY - AIR CONDITIONED WINES - LIQUORS - BEERS SEA FOOD - STEAKS - CHOPS - BASKET PARTIES WELCOME.</p>	<p>CONTINUOUS ENTERTAINMENT EVERY NIGHT A NEW DELIGHT HOME OF IRISH JIGS AND REELS FROM A SANDWICH TO A BANQUET CLAM CHOWDER - CITY PRICES For Reservations Phone ESplanade 2-2590</p>
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Photo:
Picture of an Irish immigrant couple and their young daughters taken at a Coney Island studio in 1939. Copies were made into photographic postcards for sending back to relatives in Ireland. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

80-year-old Irish women—sturdy, indeed they are—cavorting around the dance hall floor of the restaurant. They dance with joy in their eyes to tunes of “Killarney,” “Tipperary” and “Mother Machree.” How absorbed they are in their dancing as they hop about with their aged husbands, nodding their heads to the accompanying music. They wear no silk, these old Irish ladies—house dresses made of gingham are their evening gowns when they step out for a joyous time.¹¹

Furthermore, the article described:

*A sixty year old waiter then jumps on the floor and begins a spirited jig which brings a response from the audience in tossed coins on the floor—pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters. The same dancer performs similar dances every few minutes from two in the afternoon to two in the morning. A waiter then sings a popular song, but his listeners want only Irish ballads. The waiter gets generally ten per cent of his customers orders, sometimes if business is good, the earning are as much as \$50 or \$60 a week.*¹²

In addition to the singing and dancing of the waiters, for a couple of years in the mid-1930s an Irish *Feis* (a traditional dancing and musical competition) was held at Steeplechase Park as a fund-raiser for the Irish Immigrant Girls Home at the Battery. It was about the last Irish cultural event to be held in Coney Island. Irish immigration had since the early thirties almost dried up because of the lack of jobs caused by the economic depression, but by the end of the decade the need for a home for young Irish immigrants had almost completely ended.¹³

In the late 1940s, the *Irish Advocate* wrote that

*Coney Island has little to offer for Irish people who like a little native music and entertainment besides a dip in the good salt water. Our Irish business people seem to have overlooked this place for doing business, which might be a good investment because they have tremendous crowds of people, and the fare is only 5 cents now.*¹⁴

By 1965, there was only one Irish place left in Coney Island, and it would be its last:

When visiting Coney Island this

Photo:
A view of the beach
at Rockaway in
1903. Walks along
the strand were one
past-time during its
early years as a
summer favorite.
Courtesy of Library
of Congress.



summer, don't forget to pay a visit to Con Boyle at West 19 St and the Boardwalk. Con, a well-known Donegal man, has been operating this fine establishment for many years. He is always ready, in the true Irish atmosphere that prevails here to discuss Ireland's problems, past and present. You will be amazed to find so many Irish families who relax in his attractive dining room.¹⁵

THE ROCKAWAYS

The first person of Irish background to establish a bathing establishment in Far Rockaway was James McCarty, born in Manhattan of Irish parents, about the year 1848. He had a varied career as village police officer, elected representative and head of an ice manufacturing firm.¹⁶

By the early 1860s, Rockaway, specifically at this time Far Rockaway, was already sometimes claiming to be the oldest of New York's bathing choices. Rockaway had indeed been known as an Irish resort for many years by this

time, and those escaping the heat of the city had their choice of many hotels catering to an Irish clientele. Rockaway hotel cuisine was not always the best. Service was slow and by the time it arrived at the table it could be cold with gravy starting to congeal. Yet, though roast beef and corn beef were most often the main course, clams and lobster, fresh from the unpolluted ocean waters nearby, could make every Rockaway visit a treat. And while the resort had few diversions except the beach itself, which could make a rainy Sunday a bit of a disappointment, the long walks along its fine strand made it a favorite for sweethearts looking out romantically on the Atlantic towards their distant homeland.

Even in the early months of summer of 1861 as Americans came together in a bloody civil war, the weekly *Irish American* reported that "...quite a crowd of our Irish-American population have left the City during the recent heated term for Rockaway, L.I., and the consequence is, that the hotel-keepers in that popular watering-place are laboring under a plethora of business."¹⁷

Some of the Irish hoteliers were presented by the *Irish American* in a style that reflected the variety of their personalities

Then there is Caffrey, of the "Translantic Hotel," the oldest Irish American in Rockaway. He says it was all a beach when he went there. (Should not wonder, as it looks like that now, with houses built upon it.) Any New Yorker stopping here will be sure to get Billy's Best, with a cead mille failte, and (in a case like this) will never forget his visit. There is, also, Kavanagh, of the "New York Hotel," who will entertain any Irishman in the politics of his country for centuries past, and the probable drift for years to come. Besides Irish politics, Mr. Kavanagh has a fund of general information, which he conveys in a truthful, emphatic and unreserved manner. He is an excellent host, and receives his full share of the population who annually migrate to this place for salt-water bathing and sea air. Next comes Cleary, of the "Beach Hotel." Billy Cleary (as his friends insist upon calling him) is about the most popular man in Rockaway; and if Rockaway was a

municipality, and that the inhabitants wanted a representative, Billy Cleary would be elected Mayor of the City of Rockaway viva voce; and he would make an excellent representative, too. He is also a good specimen of a man in a county in Ireland who is highly respected for his capabilities and accomplishments. For instance, if a stranger, while passing through Ireland, wished to try his strength and prowess with one of the boys of the neighborhood, Billy Cleary would be the man who would be pointed out as a person likely to cope successfully with a new-comer. He is au fait at ball or hurley—dancing or fiddling. He would not mind dancing an Irish jig as long as he could get a partner to dance with. He seems never happier than when singing his favorite song, "We won't go home till morning."¹⁸

The *New York Herald* in 1873 termed Rockaway "the Irish Newport par excellence. It is frequented nearly altogether by our citizens of Irish birth or descent."¹⁹ The Irish vacationers got surprisingly good marks from the *Herald*:

When at Rockaway Beach
BE SURE AND VISIT
THE NARRAGANSETT
HOTEL AND RESTAURANT

JAMES J. QUINN (Longford), Proprietor
BOULEVARD & 97th St. Near Steeplechase Station
Right in the Heart of Rockaway Beach

Hotel on European & American Plan
With Real Old Irish Cooking

ROOMS BY THE DAY, WEEK, MONTH OR SEASON
Terms Most Reasonable at the Beach

Our Specialty — Attention to
Families and Children

Just the Place to Spend Your Holidays, Your Day's Outing,
or Your Stay at the Beach

A HEARTY WELCOME, WITH REAL OLD IRISH
HOSPITALITY AWAITS YOU HERE

MEALS, LUNCHEONS, REFRESHMENTS AT ALL
HOURS

Tel. Belle Harbor 0311 Boulevard & 97th St.

Illustration:

The Narragansett Hotel and Restaurant in 1910 at Beach 97th Street in Rockaway featured "Real Old Irish Cooking" and "Real Old Irish Hospitality." Courtesy of John T. Ridge.



Illustration:
Helen Savage performed in Rockaway during the 1930s and 1940s. She also conducted music lessons and dancing schools. Irish entertainers including Mickey Carton, Ruthie Morrissey, the McNulty's, and the Malone Sisters drew people to Rockaway's hotels and halls.
Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

The Irish citizen takes his wife and children with him, and it is a noticeable fact that Rockaway, of all the suburban watering places contiguous to New York City, is not frequented by the "soiled doves," who frequent to a greater or lesser extent the watering places of more pretentious fame and notoriety. Neither is the three-card monte man or the plausible thimble rigger to be found welcome at Rockaway. These latter individuals, when they have attempted to visit to hilarious but riotous Rockaway, have met with such rough treatment that they found it necessary to bid the Milesian seaside resort an eternal adieu. But for wild, uproarious fun Rockaway has not its equal this side of the county of Cork.²⁰

A year after the profile in the *Herald*, the *New York Times* took a look at the Far Rockaway that certainly portrayed the Irish very differently. It viewed the resort as the most neglected one of all with the Irish occupying the worst part—"the habitat of the Hibernians." The troubles of the village were laid squarely at the door of the Irish:

But just as the magnificent mansion of the famous Waltons became in its neglect and ruin a boarding-house for our emigrant friends from the Emerald Isle, so did they inherit Rockaway. And they hold it now as regards the beach and the centre of the village, though of late years many a

foreigner of a more cultivated strain and considerable wealth have made it their abiding place.²¹

An 1894 incident in Far Rockaway when the janitor raised a green flag on St. Patrick's Day while hauling down the American flag was portrayed by the troublesome *New York Times* as an outrage that caused a near riot. The report, appearing at a time when an organized effort was being made to suppress the display of Irish decorations in the city on March 17th, made it look like the Irish dominated town was deliberately replacing the stars and stripes with a foreign flag. The befuddled janitor had received the order from the Irish-surnamed president of the village, but with only one flag pole he had to switch flags to carry out his instructions. The fact that the volunteer firemen and an Irish society waiting to parade for St. Patrick's Day had led the protest to restore the American flag seemed to have made little difference to the manner in which the incident was reported.²²

While it was Far Rockaway that attracted most of the Irish until the late nineteenth century, a gradual move west along the sand bar that constituted the Rockaway Peninsula was taking place from the 1880s. The area that became famous as Rockaway's Irish Town, otherwise known as the Seaside neighborhood of the peninsula, continued to develop with the construction of scores of bungalows and, in the course of several decades but especially the one between World War II and the 1950s, the opening of literally hundreds of bars and

hotels catering to an Irish clientele. Despite a fire that burned down practically all of Seaside in 1892, the neighborhood recovered quickly until, by World War I, it was largely at what was to be its hey-day down to the Second World War.²³

Those businessmen that arrived first were often the most successful and didn't confine themselves to one enterprise:

The pioneer business man of the Rockaways is John Fitzgerald, and this season he is starting off on a larger scale than ever. The longest established of his business places is the Celtic Hotel, Beach 108th Street and the oceanfront. His next popular center is on the corner of the Boulevard and B. 108 Street (Fitzgerald's Hotel). There is a bar and restaurant with furnished rooms to rent by day, week or season. Another well-known establishment is 107-07 Boulevard near B. 107th Street. A bar and restaurant is attached and furnished rooms are also to rent. The Bridge Hotel in Broad Channel is also owned and managed by Mr. Fitzgerald.²⁴

Irish Town was crowded with taverns and restaurants, and many of them were, in fact, the summertime branches of bars in the city, chiefly Manhattan, often bearing the same name as the parent bar. Typical of these was the Log Cabin Grill that like most of them sponsored regular bus service between the original bar in Manhattan and Rockaway in 1934:

During the summer season buses will leave Young's Old Log Cabin Grill, Columbus Avenue and 103rd Street, every Friday Hotel at 190 Beach 103d Street between the Boulevard and the Boardwalk, Seaside, Rockaway Beach. The Log Cabin in New York and the Log Cabin in Rockaway are under the same management—Mr. and Mrs. Young. The Log Cabin Hotel is made up of nice, light, airy and large furnished rooms with the privilege of light housekeeping. There is also an indoor and outdoor restaurant where good home cooked meals are served at low prices.



Photo:

St. Malachy's Orphanage at Beach 112th Street in Rockaway opened in 1898 and closed in 1943. After the Orphanage closed, the building became a convent for the Sisters of St. Joseph until it was demolished in the late 1950s. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

Photo:
A "bungalow colony" in Rockaway in 1903. The construction of scores of bungalows, hotels, and bars contributed to the growth of what became known as "Irish Town" early in the twentieth century. Courtesy of Library of Congress.



A bar that is fully licensed is also on the premises as well as a large and beautiful ballroom. It is one of the most complete hotels in the Rockaways. It is an ideal place to spend any period of a vacation. The Log Cabin Grill at 103d and Columbus Avenue will continue to do business as usual and, as already announced, it will be the meeting place for the buses going to Rockaway every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night. The round trip is only 50 cents. Peggy Sheridan is one of the waitresses at the Log Cabin Hotel. The Log Cabin Band plays Irish and American dance music and the admission is free.²⁵

Rockaway was not just a summer resort that the Irish completely abandoned in the cool weather, although the crowds certainly did disappear. Just as earlier in Far Rockaway, a large residential community settled in the Irish Town area and in 1909 formed St. Camilus Roman Catholic Parish that became both a spiritual and cultural center

for the nearby Irish. This powerful institution along with other nearby parishes helped to anchor the Irish population. The remnants of the Irish community in Seaside still constitute, along with the other Irish areas along the peninsula like Belle Harbor all the way to the gated community of Breezy Point on its western tip, the strongest concentration of individuals of Irish descent in the city.

Although there were other ethnic groups in Rockaway, particularly in Far Rockaway where a large Jewish settlement was displacing the long dominant Irish, a definite Irish aura hovered over the community. When passions rose during the fight for Irish Independence, a local branch of the Friends of Irish Freedom was formed in Rockaway. The Irish in Rockaway were powerful enough to win allies from unexpected sources:

Fifty Chinese made application yesterday for membership in the Malachi the Great Branch, Friends of Irish Freedom, of Rockaway Beach. The application was presented by Charles Priestly, president of the branch, who

*said the applications proved that every nation and race is interested in winning freedom for Ireland, and is behind the Irish Republic.*²⁶

After many years of interrupted immigration because of the war for the Irish Republic and the Irish Civil War, and even more so because of the Great War, thousands of young Irish settled in New York in the early 1920s. It was this immigrant generation that gave Rockaway its fame and brought about its best years in the late 1920s up to World War II:

*Rockaway Beach is the Irish mecca of the Atlantic seaboard; it was a pleasure to visit any of the Irish resorts along the Boulevard and the Boardwalk. Every place where dancing is licensed was crowded to the doors with the hearty and pleasure-loving Irish youth—the best samples we have seen in two generations from Ireland. This was evident at O’Reilly’s Queen Beach Hotel, the Clare House and Jacky O’Connell’s Cross Bay at Seaside; John Fitzgerald’s New Celtic Hotel at 108th Street; O’Grady’s Seaside House, the Inniscarra Gardens in Beach 94th Street, where Jimmy McGrath’s Orchestra does the trick. O’Sullivan’s, Shanley’s and Reilly’s bathhouses were as crowded as Curley’s or the Park Inn and at half the latter’s price of admission.*²⁷

The Rockaway restaurant kitchens often prepared Irish specialties like “pig’s knuckles and cabbage” and “ham and cabbage” that were often missing from the menus of Irish restaurants elsewhere in the city. But more than the food, it was the entertainment that attracted Irish to Rockaway. For lovers of Irish music especially, Rockaway was as close to paradise as one could get since in the summertime as virtually all the popular bands and performers made appearances. James Hayden, the popular Irish radio host, dominated much of the music scene with his periodic shows that he staged at St. Camilus for the benefit of the church. The shows combined seasoned musi-

cians with dozens of young Irish American musicians, most of whom he introduced to the stage for the first time. His biggest success was the McNulty Family, Ma, Eileen and Pete, who appeared from the early 1930s until well into the 1960s in various Rockaway venues. The McNultys made dozens of records and albums which familiarized their unique blend of vaudeville and traditional Irish to audiences across America and in Ireland. Constant performers in the summer on the Rockaway stage, their personable style won them a loyal following.

For the musicians performing in the dozens of venues in Rockaway in the summer, it was often a mixed bag. Competition among the dance hall owners was often fierce—many of the bars were side by side in a street of similar enterprises, crowds often deserted *en masse* when word got out of an appearance nearby of a particularly favorite musician. Problems of being underpaid or not paid at all were not uncommon, but life during the Depression forced many a good musician to just continue to play his best and hope for the best.

In addition to helping preserve and popularize Irish music, a remarkable religious tradition took place at noon time every day on the beach and boardwalk in front of the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent at the promenade and Beach 112th Street. This was a section of the beach widely patronized by Irish Catholics from the nearby hotels and bungalows. As the *Long Island Star Journal* reported in 1955:

*Every day at noon almost everyone on Rockaway Beach stands up and faces inland. It doesn’t matter whether they’re strolling on the boardwalk or cavorting in the sand. Rockaway Beach, it happens, is one of the few places on Long Island where the Angelus is rung and one of the even rarer places where it widely observed by the public.*²⁸

The Angelus tradition, dating back to the Middle Ages, was particularly meaningful to the vacationing nuns lining the porch and enjoying the sea breezes. Very few people failed to take part in the observance. The old convent was

Photo:
Bungalows at Staten Island's Midland Beach were popular with Irish New Yorkers up to the late 1940s. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish clustered in lower Manhattan found beaches on the Island attractive.
 Courtesy of John T. Ridge.



demolished in 1959, and Stella Maris High School was constructed on the site. It is not known when exactly the old custom faded away.

In 2007, *New York Times* writer Corey Kilgannon attended an Irish Town reunion held in a Knights of Columbus Hall by a group of nostalgic seniors. Although not designed to be a wake, it had all the earmarks of a final salute to the old neighborhood. It was as formal a goodbye to the old neighborhood as there ever will be. By that point in time, it had been fifty years since most of Irish Town was torn down to build modern apartment houses, and there was very little left to remind anyone of the Irish Town of boom times.

What killed off Irish Town was what essentially killed off most other Irish neighborhoods of the city. In 1965, the immigration system was changed effectively limiting the number of Irish newcomers to a trickle.

Coupled with the physical destruction of the old hotels and bungalows and ethnic changes in Rockaway, nothing looked or was the same. Moreover, international travel became relatively inexpensive, and a trip back to the old country for a couple of weeks began to compare favorably with rent-

ing a sparsely furnished, often musty, bungalow. Kilgannon summed up the reunion's positive old memories that refused to die: "To hear the recollections, one would think Irish Town was a piece of heaven in Queens that had dropped out of the sky and nestled along the boardwalk from Beach 116th Street to Rockaways Playland."²⁹

STATEN ISLAND

During the mid-nineteenth century when the Irish-born population was clustered in the lower part of Manhattan below Fourteenth Street, Staten Island was a frequent summertime destination for those seeking a break from the heat of the city. A long established ferry service between the northern tip of the Staten Island and the Battery made it easy for city residents to make the crossing to the then largely rural island. A long stretch of coast southward from the ferry terminal defined the western entrance from New York Harbor and featured numerous beaches, some of which had entertainment and refreshment facilities for visitors. In the 1800s, Staten Island was the most popular destination for group excursions of the various Irish-American social

and political organizations, many of whom chartered steamboats and barges to bring what seemed to be entire Manhattan neighborhoods to ship landings where resort facilities were a nearby feature.

The frequent weekend excursions of the various Irish societies continued to bring Irish visitors to the island until the 1940s but, as noted, the pattern had been set for over a hundred years. In 1851, excursionists on their third annual excursion from lower Manhattan's St. Patrick's Total Abstinence Society left from Catherine Street on the East River at seven o'clock in the morning for a day long visit to Staten Island for the purpose of raising funds for the new orphanage in what the committee promised to be "the most comfortable, agreeable excursion of the season."³⁰ In August, 1853, the Thomas F. Meagher Club, named after the Irish patriot recently escaped from British captivity in Australia, chartered a steamboat and a barge for over five hundred of its members and friends from the foot of Chambers Street to an isolated grove on the island opposite Perth Amboy for a day of feasting, dancing, singing, sport and bathing.

Although Irish American group excursions continued to be popular from Manhattan until well into the 1940s, regular summertime steamer service began to bring independent day tripping visitors to beaches like Midland Beach in the 1890s. This resort developed into a "small city in itself," complete with its own amusement park rides and boardwalk and not far beyond the beach hundreds of bungalows were built along newly laid out streets.³² Midland Beach developed into what was known as a family resort where many of its seasonal dwellings were bought or rented by Irish from the city. Irish-American clubs sometimes like the Wanderers Social Club in 1916, a Manhattan sport and social society, rented a bungalow for its members for the entire season, the house becoming the rendezvous for both members and friends.³³

One of the big attractions for the Irish, beginning in 1916, was the performances of Professor James M. McGrath's Orchestra at Midland Beach's largest hostelry, May's Hotel, for the entire summer season. McGrath had a long career furnishing orchestra music for the Irish societies of New York, particularly the

GRAND OPENING
DUFFY'S SEASIDE HALL
 (Formerly the Harris Hotel)
ON THE BOARDWALK
SOUTH BEACH --- STATEN ISLAND
THURSDAY, JULY 4th, 1929
 IRISH AND AMERICAN DANCING
 REFRESHMENTS AT CITY PRICES
 BASKET PARTIES WELCOME
 OPEN EVERY DAY IN THE WEEK UNTIL 1 A. M.
 LOCKERS AND ROOMS
 PATRICK M. DUFFY, Prop. and Mgr.
 Directions: Staten Island Ferry Boat From South Ferry and South
 Beach Trolley Car, Staten Island Railroad or South Beach Bus.

Manahan's Band, one of the most popular Irish brass orchestras of the era, provided the entertainment until late into the evening and the return of gung to the city.³¹

Cork Men's Association, for which he provided as many as four bands in separate halls for their big St. Patrick's Day gala. All of McGrath's concerts at Staten Island were free.³⁴

Illustration:
 Duffy's on the
 boardwalk at South
 Beach in Staten
 Island was one of
 many Irish halls
 owned or managed
 by Mayo-born James
 Duffy. Courtesy of
 John T. Ridge.

By the end of summer, the *Irish Advocate* could report that *while the other places at these resorts were wondering why the throngs do not patronize their places. May's cannot find rooms for the overflow which is attracted by this young professor's music. Jim is just as popular at Midland as he is among the Irish societies.*³⁵

Other prominent Irish bandleaders like Professor Patrick J. McNamara and Francis X. Hennessey (the *uilleann* piper) were entertainers at Midland Beach in the early 1920s. McNamara was a native of Limerick “who did more for the revival and encouragement of Irish Gaelic music than any other, band leader in America to-day.”³⁶ Even non-Irish organizations like the local Midland Beach branch of Knights of Columbus featured Irish dancing and piping as the main attraction at their annual Midland Beach Carnival in 1922.³⁷

By 1924, a large number of the bungalows at the beach were occupied by Irish-born residents of Manhattan, Bronx and Brooklyn. The social columns in Irish-American weeklies like the *Irish Advocate* reported every week on their coming and goings and the lively social scene that was developing. But tragedy struck in September, 1924 at the resort community when a quick spreading fire completely

its regular advertising in the weekly *Irish Advocate*. It was the only facility offering regular “Irish and American dancing” in the late 1920s.³⁹ In the 1930s, the Hotel Lincoln regularly advertised in the *Irish Advocate* its daily and weekly rooms, but offered no indication of Irish entertainment. Still, as late as 1943, *Irish Advocate* columnist Pat Frestal was spending the Labor Day weekend at Midland Beach and could pronounce it “our favorite resort.”⁴⁰

While the Irish ethnic element has disappeared from Midland Beach, the old resort's main problem today is maintaining the quality of the beach. Pollution and beach erosion, especially after Super Storm Sandy, have taken their toll.

KEANSBURG

Keansburg was the New Jersey version of Rockaway. Although there was frequent ferry service from Manhattan, it was still about an hour away, but it was much easier to reach by automobile. For this reason, Keansburg attracted a dominant crowd of Irish from New Jersey cities like Jersey City in Hudson County and the City of Newark. Nevertheless, it was also a strong draw for New York City Irish seeking an alternative to the brashness of Coney Island or

Illustration:
Piper Francis X. Hennessey was an occasional player at Midland Beach during the early 1920s. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.



destroyed the amusement area, but a bucket brigade of bungalow residents managed to save their dwellings.³⁸

Duffy's Seaside Hall, directly on the boardwalk in South Beach, just a stroll down the promenade from Midland Beach became a kind of singular beacon for the Irish community with

the crowds of Rockaway's Irish Town. With its many bungalows, it was often the place to spend a long summer holiday. The *Irish Advocate* reported in 1926:

Keansburg, N. J. is becoming more popular with Irish folks from New York, Brooklyn and Jersey City. Bungalowing

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down there brings you in contact with many people you know in the city. It is a family resort and particularly agreeable for children. A two-hour ride on the boat from the Battery is a very pleasant trip.⁴¹

Although there was good bus service between Jersey City and Keansburg, the majority of New York Irish arrived by boat. Excursion trips of individual societies by chartered and regular ferries were also more common than to any other Irish summertime destination in the 1920s and 1930s. Better ground connections could be made to either Rockaway, Coney Island, or even Midland Beach than to more distant Keansburg. Some individuals were easily subject to sea sickness in the often choppy waters of the lower bay. A typical itinerary for Irish societies was like that of the Clare Ramblers in 1934:

Boat leaves the Battery at 10 a.m. Sheehan's Hotel and Ballroom has been also reserved for dinner arrangements. The committee says bring your bathing suit, bungalows for dressing will be at your disposal. Larry O'Brien has ordered all the men to dress in white. We are taking our own orchestra consisting of Messrs. Butler, McCoy, Lynch and Phelan. Mrs. Boyle and Mrs. Doyle are our agents in Keansburg, and they assure us of a 100 percent pleasant day.⁴²

Sometimes, for smaller numbers of excursionists, buses were chartered for the trip to Keansburg. Two years earlier in 1930, a group from the St. Enda's Branch of the Gaelic League on the west side of Manhattan took its members and guests for the fare of \$2 for a round trip to the Jersey resort.⁴³ More frequently, excursions by bus left Newark and Jersey City, many of them from Irish-dominated political associations.

Hotels were numerous and many like the Roscommon House provided their own nightly entertainment like Peggy Foley's and Martin Connolly "Original Roscommon Boys Band." This resort was owned by Newark's Roscommon House which drew on support from the many immigrants from this county then living in the city. New York's famous McNulty Family not only vacationed in Keansburg in 1936, but did a benefit for the local Roman Catholic Parish of St Ann's.⁴⁴

Even through the World War II years, Keansburg remained an active resort community. It also had a large Scottish presence, some of whom were of Irish descent. The two groups seemed to meld together on many occasions into Scottish-Irish stage shows, many of them held at Flynn's Shamrock Cabaret, that mixed and comedy from both groups.⁴⁵ The architect of these mixed Irish and Scottish shows was *Irish*

Illustration:

Keansburg's Roscommon House was a branch of the original house on South Orange Avenue in Newark. By the mid-1920s the New Jersey resort had become increasingly popular as a family place with New York and New Jersey Irish. For Manhattan residents, it was a two-hour boat ride away. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.

Advocate columnist Joe McKeown, born in Scotland of Irish parents. He was for many years also the soccer columnist for the paper. His social circle included both Scots and Irish and found in Keansburg a resort where the two nationalities met and apparently mixed well. He started the Scottish-Irish stage shows at Flynn's and acted as master of ceremonies and performer in many of the shows. Using his widespread Irish contacts through his *Irish Advocate* column, he introduced the two ethnicity shows at various halls and cabarets around New York City.

Keansburg as a resort began to fade rapidly in the late 1940s as it lost its appeal to Irish vacationers to beaches further down the Jersey Shore.

CONCLUSION

Coney Island, Rockaway, Staten Island, and Keansburg still maintain some of the appeal of seaside resorts of yesteryear, but their golden days are long over. The Irish ethnic presence is hardly discernable except in the case of Rockaway where many residents of Irish descent still populate the area. Without a massive new wave of immigration from Ireland, there will never be anything again like the old Irish resorts.

Endnotes

- 1 *New York Times*, June 7, 1899
- 2 *Irish American*, July 15, 1882
- 3 *Brooklyn Eagle*, November 5, 1953
- 4 *Brooklyn Eagle*, November 29, 1953
- 5 *Irish Advocate*, August 12, 1916
- 6 *New York Times*, April 20, 1924 and *Oakland Tribune*, June 8, 1924
- 7 *Irish Advocate*, July 16, 1927
- 8 *Irish Advocate*, July 17, 1925 and June 17, 1951
- 9 *Irish Advocate*, May 13, 1947
- 10 *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 29, 1929
- 11 *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 29, 1929
- 12 *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 29, 1929
- 13 *Irish Advocate*, July 25, 1936
- 14 *Irish Advocate*, April 17, 1948
- 15 *Irish Advocate*, June 26, 1965
- 16 *Irish World*, May 30, 1903
- 17 *Irish American* August 24, 1861
- 18 *Irish American*, August 24, 1861
- 19 *New York Herald*, July 28, 1873
- 20 *New York Herald*, July 28, 1873
- 21 *New York Times*, May 31, 1874
- 22 *New York Times*, March 18, 1894
- 23 Emil R. Lucev and Katie Lucev, "Irish Town History," Rockaway Times website. "Irish Town" was generally considered to be everything between Beach 116th Street and Rockaway Playland (Beach 98 Street)
- 24 *Irish Advocate*, June 23, 1934
- 25 *Irish Advocate* June 23, 1934
- 26 *New York Tribune*, August 6, 1919
- 27 *Irish American*, July 27, 1929
- 28 *Long Island Star Journal*, August 8, 1955
- 29 *New York Times*, September 25, 2007
- 30 *Irish American*, August 17, 1851
- 31 *New York Times*, August 25, 1853
- 32 *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 1, 1913
- 33 *Irish American*, June 24, 1916
- 34 *Irish Advocate*, June 24, 1916
- 35 *Irish Advocate*, August 22, 1916
- 36 *Irish Advocate*, April 29, 1916
- 37 *Irish Advocate*, October 7, 1922
- 38 *Brooklyn Eagle*, September 27, 1924
- 39 *Irish Advocate*, July 13, 1929
- 40 *Irish Advocate*, September 17, 1943
- 41 *Irish Advocate*, July 25 1926
- 42 *Irish Advocate*, September 1, 1934
- 43 *Irish Advocate*, May 31, 1930
- 44 *Irish Advocate*, July 25, 1936
- 45 *Irish Advocate*, July 12, 1941