

Rose of Tralee: Roots Planted in New York

BY MAUREEN DUNPHY BRADY

In the 1950s, the Irish Government seeking ways to stimulate the weakened economy looked to the United States with its 2.5 million population of Irish-born and first-generation Irish-Americans as a potential solution to the fiscal concern. Seán Lemass, Ireland's minister



for industry and commerce, spearheaded efforts to accelerate the growth of transatlantic tourism in order to combat the economic downturn. In 1953, the Irish Government sponsored a multi-year, national festival concentrated on culture and heritage named *A Tóstal*, marketed in America as "Ireland at Home" because of "the sentimental attachment... of Irish Americans."¹

Building on the festival as a national event, local celebrations were subsequently created. A stellar regional example, based on the *Tóstal* format, was the Festival of Kerry and Rose of Tralee beauty pageant. Local businessmen cleverly tapped into the reservoir of Irish American popular culture, where the 1947 recording of "The Rose of Tralee" by Bing Crosby (Decca 23788) followed up on John McCormack's version from 1930. The song's broadcast history plus two decades of 78rpm commercial sales had made it a

classic in America, one that was easily married to the Festival of Kerry's pageant. The notional love story of a Tralee native yearning for his beloved "Mary, Rose of Tralee" provided a touching framework for the event, as did the appeal of a homecoming for young women of Kerry extraction in America. The viability of the festival in its nascent years, however, largely depended on the dedicated efforts of a network of Irish immigrants in New York.

A DECREASING POPULATION

At the time of the festival's creation, the population of Ireland was contracting. The decline, primarily a consequence of emigration, was a national dilemma. Almost twenty-percent of the Irish departed the country in the decade following the end of World War II, more than a third of whom settled in New York.² Between 1945 and 1961, the rate of female emigration from Ireland was the highest of any country in Europe; most of the women were single and were migrating to cities in the Northeast.³ Seventy-two percent of all women who applied for travel documents in Ireland were under the age of twenty-four years old.⁴ In 1951, an American journalist visiting Cork, Kerry, and Galway in Ireland's rural west observed: "The girls say that on the land they might as well be slaves.... work in the lonely cottages yields only drudgery. Water must be carried from a field. Cooking must be done over a low turf fire. Only the dim glow of a candle or oil lamp furnishes light. So women are in flight from the land."⁵

The Report of the Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems (1955) noted that accessible amenities like electricity, running water, modern housing and transportation were significant enticements for female emigrants. The possibility of enhanced personal status was as relevant to them as was access to increased wages and improved working conditions.⁶ Gainful

Photo: Seán Lemass, Ireland's minister of industry and commerce, received a proposal from Pan American Airways recommending creation of a national celebration each year in March, around St. Patrick's Day, called "Come Back to Erin." Their idea was to develop Ireland's transatlantic tourism industry by attracting Irish-American visitors and growing "new sources of dollar income." Lemass, sensing the scheme had merit, evolved the concept into a multi-year initiative focused on culture and heritage and named it "An Tóstal: Ireland at Home." From 1959 to 1966, Lemass served as Ireland's Taoiseach. Courtesy of RTE.

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Photo:
In 1952, Bord Fáilte launched publication of the bi-monthly magazine, *Ireland of the Welcomes*, to augment marketing in America. Distribution was free to travel agents, airlines, shipping companies, chambers of commerce, and Irish embassies and consulates. Cost to consumers was \$1.50 for an annual subscription. Feature articles were written by respected Irish literary figures. The November-December 1952 issue was devoted to the inaugural Tóstal celebration. Courtesy of the Trinity College Dublin Library.



Illustration:
The local Kerryman newspaper highlighted various aspects of the Festival of Kerry, including a program hailing the event as "The Greatest Free Show on Earth" for each day, from August 29 to September 3, showing an array of activities to ensure something for everyone. On Monday, August 31, the Rose of Tralee dance was held at the Ashe Memorial Hall with selection of the first-ever winner of the "Rose of Tralee" pageant taking place at 9:30 p.m. Courtesy of the Kerryman.

employment enabled them to send home remittances from earnings and no longer be a drain on family resources. Female emigrants became an important financial asset for parents.⁷

Overall, the decade of the 1950s in Ireland was a bleak period of incessant emigration exacerbated by a stagnant economy.⁸ Kerry, like many counties in the west of Ireland, was one of the areas hardest hit. From 1946 to 1951, it was one of two counties to experience the highest average annual rate of net emigration per 1,000 persons.⁹ Historically, the county's population statistics were trending downward since the 1850s; in 1956, the population of Kerry had decreased a staggering 18% since the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922.¹⁰

A WELL-RECEIVED CONCEPT

It was against this gloomy backdrop that organizers of what became the Festival of Kerry and Rose of Tralee Festival began to partner with Kerry immigrants in New York to target dollar revenue. The idea of the festival evolved from the popularity of the Ballybeggan Races in Tralee which, from 1957, included a carnival and the selection of a "Carnival Queen." The success of

its first two years prompted local businessmen to expand the idea as a means of securing continued visitor growth and tourism income. In 1958, Dan Nolan, publisher of the *Kerryman* newspaper, suggested that the carnival be recast as the Festival of Kerry, evolving the "Carnival Queen" component into a separate Rose of Tralee Festival. The concept was well received by prospective collaborators in New York, and even the mayor of the city, Robert Wagner, committed to attend the festivities and form a New York delegation to accompany him.¹¹

The refrain of the popular ballad "The Rose of Tralee" became the *de facto* leitmotif of a celebration aimed at finding a worthy personification of its subject:

*She was lovely and fair as the rose
of the summer,
Yet 'twas not her beauty alone
that won me;
Oh no, 'twas the truth in her eyes
ever dawning,
That made me love
Mary, the Rose of Tralee.*¹²

The Festival of Kerry - 1959

TRALEE

August 29 to September 3

INCLUSIVE

*

THE GREATEST FREE SHOW ON EARTH!

Miles of Decorative Lighting, something completely new in Fireworks, Donkey Derby, World Champion Sheep-dog Demonstrations, Tralee's muscle men in Tug-o'-War, and the strong men of the county Tossing the Sheaf; Street-Dancing, Polka Competitions, Competitions for Accordion Playing, Cycle and Foot Races, Novelty Races, Swimming and Canoe Races in the Canal.

Initially, the winner of the Rose of Tralee title was selected from young women who were born, or had one or both parents who were born, in

the Tralee area. Then, those from any part of County Kerry were welcome to participate.¹³ A few years later, in order to increase the selection pool, the pedigree condition was expanded to include grandparents born in the county.¹⁴ Other criteria remain fixed: “girls must be unmarried, [and] over 17 years old,” with additional points awarded for “personality, graciousness, dignity and beauty.”¹⁵

The “Rose of Tralee” song not only allowed festival organizers to narrow the search for their beauty but offered an actual destination for tourism. The pursuit of transatlantic contestants was endorsed and supported locally by county Kerry societies in the United States. The societies were important networks for recent immigrants and served to preserve links between Ireland and Irish America.¹⁶ New immigrants drew on the advice and knowledge of members in these benevolent and social organizations who had settled in America before them. The societies also provided older immigrants opportunities to mingle with friends and reconnect with Ireland through interactions with recent arrivals. Additionally, the groups were a point of contact for county representatives in Ireland wishing to maintain links with their diaspora in America.

Luke Finn, first president of the United Irish Counties Association in New York, observed: “They provided that kind of contact with people from your own parish and from your own county...so the county organizations were...*the* touch of home.”¹⁷

THE NEW YORK ASSOCIATION

One of the earliest and most active county organizations was the New York Kerry men’s Patriotic and Benevolent Association. It supported the Festival of Kerry and Rose of Tralee Festival from inception. Association members formed committees to host fundraising dances, select a Rose, pay for her trip to Ireland, and arrange transatlantic charter flights for members who wished to travel across the Atlantic for the event. The planning and execution of these various efforts were undertaken by a corps of committed volunteers. Maurice Cantillon, past president of the New York Kerry men’s Association reflected:

*We did the best we could to help. Our family and friends in Ireland needed our support to get it started. For us, it was a way to come together for a good cause for those at home. We couldn’t have imagined that what we were creating with the festival would become an Irish institution! It was history in the making and we were part of it.*¹⁸

For the inaugural Rose of Tralee Festival in 1959, the selection committee chose Sheila Ann Horgan. As the first winner to carry the New York Rose mantle, she was also bestowed an ancillary title of “Kerry Belle of New York.” A congratulatory dance was held at Gaelic Park on August 15 so “Kerry exiles and friends in New York” could wish their Rose congratulations and *bon voyage*. Eighteen-year old Horgan, a high school student, was born in the Bronx, claiming her Kerry connection through her father Edward who was raised on a farm near Ballyroe, Tralee. His two nephews, Sheila’s first cousins, were still living there.¹⁹ The title win would enable Horgan to visit her father’s birthplace and meet her kinfolk. The young New Yorker’s trip, wholly funded by the New York Kerry men’s Association, sealed Horgan’s place in Ireland’s tourism history as the first American Rose to participate in the festival. She was joined by 150 people traveling with her from New York for the festival at the end of August.²⁰

The first Festival of Kerry was hailed as “the greatest free show on earth.” In addition to the races at Ballybeggan Park, and the Rose of Tralee Festival, an array of “fun and games” including, a sheep-dog demonstration, a donkey derby, street dancing, an accordion competition, an Irish dancing exhibition, swimming and canoe races, a handball championship, an All-Ireland junior football semi-final, and a kayak race were scheduled. To ensure the public was aware of all the happenings, a program was published for each day of the festival in a local newspaper. The week-long festival, from August 29 to September 3, held activities to attract the largest number of people possible. There were so many events planned that an advertisement

Photo:

Alice O'Sullivan from Dublin was chosen in 1959 as the first "Rose of Tralee." The other four contestants represented Ireland, Britain, and the U.S.: Kathleen Sheehy from Tralee; Angela Flynn from London, England; Maura Browne from Birmingham, England; and Sheila Ann Horgan from New York.

The judges included Michael Mulchinock, a great-grandnephew of the author of the event's theme song. In 2009, Alice O'Sullivan returned to Tralee as one of the judges for the fiftieth anniversary of the festival. Courtesy of Irish Examiner.

Illustration:

The New York Kerry-men's Association promoted the 1960 "Kerry Beauty Ball" in the Irish Advocate newspaper for six weeks leading up to the event on May 20 in order to create greater awareness and broader participation. The advertisement included the contest application for entries into "The Queen of Kerry" contest. Requirements for the contest were that the applicant be at least 18 years old and born in Kerry. Courtesy of the Irish Advocate.

for the festival joked: "It will add years to your life—if you survive it!"²¹ Significantly, the two events named as delineators of the opening and closing of Ireland's extended tourist season were the St. Patrick's Day parade on March 17 and the Festival of Kerry and Rose of Tralee Festival in September.²²

Buoyed by the success of the inaugural festival, the New York Kerry-men's Association pledged support for the following year's event. In order to solicit broader participation in their 1960 "Kerry Beauty Contest," an advertisement,

The Kerry Beauty Contest
to select

"The Queen of Kerry"



Requirement:
Applicants must be 18 years of age or over and must be born in Kerry.

PRIZE: ROUND TRIP TO IRELAND . . . including three days stay at the "Lake Hotel" Killarney

Who will be selected on Friday Evening, May 20, 1960
at the
"KERRY BEAUTY BALL" - YORKVILLE CASINO,
210 East 86th Street, New York City

(CONTESTANTS WILL REPORT BY 8 P.M. MAY 20th)

Name Tel. No.
Address City

Place of Birth

Send APPLICATIONS including photo to:

inclusive of a contest entry form, was published weekly in the *Irish Advocate* for a six-week period prior to the event. In the publicity, the contest title was presented in various ways, including "The Belle of Kerry Queen" and "The Queen of Kerry" indicating the formative period of the pageant. The prize for securing the title was an all-expense, round-trip ticket to Ireland, including three days at the Lake Hotel in Killarney. Interested New York contestants, who were at least 18 years old and born in Kerry, were directed to complete and mail the entry form, along with a photograph, to contest headquarters at West 42nd Street.²³ Marketing for the "Kerry Beauty Ball" at which the winner would be chosen



encouraged "young men who are looking for the girl of their dreams" to attend the function as "this could be your lucky night."²⁴

On May 20, 1960 at the Yorkville Casino, 210 East 86th Street, Mickey Devine, a popular singer and entertainer, was master of ceremonies.²⁵ Highlights of the evening included music by Andy Kerrigan's orchestra and a visit from Miss Rheingold, the winner of a beauty contest sponsored by a New York beer company. Each attendee at the Kerry Beauty Ball was given a ballot to cast a vote for their choice of Rose representative out of a field of twenty-three contestants. Joan Dineen, a native of Annascaul, won the title of 1960 New York Rose "by a clear majority." Mike McGlynn, co-chairman of the American Festival of Kerry Committee, presented the victorious contestant with a bouquet of flowers and a three-week, all-expense paid trip to Ireland. Contest organizers and association members celebrated her triumph and their own achievement of staging a successful event.²⁶



Dineen, who immigrated to New York in 1951, lived with her aunt in the Bronx and worked at the upscale Stouffer's restaurant, Top of the Sixes, on Fifth Avenue. Having heard about the success of the previous year's inaugural festival, she was motivated to participate and try her luck among a competitive field of like-minded young women. For Dineen, being named the New York Rose was a singular achievement, not for herself alone but also for those still at home, many of whom sent a Western Union telegram expressing congratulations.²⁷

In August, the night before "the big Irish-American airlift to the Festival of Kerry," the New York Rose was joined by Roses from Boston and Chicago as guests at a festive reception at the Hotel Governor Clinton in New York hosted by the Festival Committee. The following day, the three American Roses flew to Ireland from the transatlantic gateway city of New York. The committee also coordinated charter flights filled with Kerry natives making the journey.²⁸

Charter flights from New York were expressly organized to bring dollar-wielding tourists to the region in support of their Rose entrant.²⁹ In 1960, there were a total of five charter flights. The first one arrived in Shannon from Idlewild Airport in New York (the former name of John F. Kennedy Airport) after a twelve-and-a-half hour journey, symptomatic of the pre-Jet Age era. Onboard the plane were Barth Sheehy, native of Ballyduff and president

of the New York Kerrymen's Association; Tralee-born Tom Barrett, secretary of the association; Commissioner Sean P. Keating, deputy mayor of New York; Joan Dineen, the New York Rose, and a large delegation of members and friends of the association. Shannon Airport Authority hosted the weary travelers to a welcome reception, serving them its signature libation—Irish coffee. Afterwards, a procession of fifty motor cars transported the visitors to Tralee where they were met by Dan Nolan, President of the Festival of Kerry, who introduced Sheehy as "a tower of strength in the promotion of the Festival of Kerry in New York." There was also a touching reunion of a mother and son on his return after emigrating thirty years earlier, achieving another goal of the festival—"bringing together the exiled sons and daughters of Kerry and their own kith and kin."³⁰

Tom Ryle, chairman of the town's Urban Council, welcomed all who came to support the celebration, saying the number of Americans who accepted the town's invitation "was answered beyond our expectations" and "we want you to feel that you have a home from home here...we hope you will act as ambassadors abroad for the old town and county."³¹

Dan Nolan commended the overseas cooperation the town received:

*The Committee have had that active assistance of Kerry men and women in... New York, Chicago, Boston...the fruit of their work is seen in the contingent that are here representing these great centres [sic] of exiles from Kerry. The Wild Geese have returned to spend a few happy, memorable days.*³²

On August 30, twenty-one year old Theresa Kenny, the Chicago representative, was chosen to be the 1960 "Rose of Tralee" winner by a panel of judges, including Commissioner Keating from New York. This second festival marked another resounding success, prompting one visitor to proclaim, "These were the most exciting moments of my life."³³ Even before it was over, charter flights were being organized for the following year. Carl Sugrue, New York

Photo:

On July 30, 1960, the Kerryman newspaper included a photo of the winner of the New York Rose "Kerry Beauty Contest" along with key organizers and participants. The caption for the photo reads: "Back row—Nora Murphy, Michael McGlynn, Joan Dineen (winner), Cearbhall O Siochfhradha, Lulu Dennehy, and Mrs. Tom Barrett. Front row—Pat Cronin (third from left). Also included: James Cashman and Kevin O Siochfhrada." Courtesy of Joan Casey.

representative for Irish Airlines, a Dingle native, and a member of the New York Kerry men's Association, informed the local newspaper that \$17,000 had already been deposited for three charter flights for the third Festival of Kerry. Catherine Stadler, a New York travel agency executive, was so impressed that she planned

Photo:

Joan Dineen, a native of Annascaul, County Kerry, was chosen as winner of the 1960 New York Rose contest out of a field of twenty-three contestants. She lived with her aunt in the Bronx and worked at the upscale Stouffer's restaurant "Top of the Sixes" on Fifth Avenue. Michael McGlynn, co-chairman of the American Festival of Kerry Committee, presented a delighted Ms. Dineen with a bouquet of flowers and an all-expense round trip to Ireland as her prize winnings. Courtesy of Joan Casey.



to put it on her 1961 European tour schedule. "Americans would love the drive from Shannon," she declared, and "of course, the Rose of Tralee competition." She urged the organizers to continue to improve facilities as the festival grew to ensure they met the expectations of the growing number of American tourists.³⁴

In October, at their annual Fall Dance in New York, the Kerry men's Association honored the newly crowned 1960 "Rose of Tralee," Theresa Kenny, along with New York Rose Joan Dineen and Boston Rose Kathleen Nash. Timothy Murphy and Chris Keane, chairman and co-chairman of the dance committee, chose the Yorkville Casino at 86th Street and Third Avenue as the dance venue and John O'Neill and his orchestra performed to a crowded ballroom.³⁵ The success of the festival ensured the New York Association's continued commitment.

In 1961, three American Roses from New York, Boston and Chicago, all born in Kerry, traveled to Tralee to compete against eight other contestants. New York Rose Maureen Sheehan, a native of Caherciveen, had emigrated five years earlier and was employed at a bank. Sheehan won her title at the "Rose of Tralee Dance and Contest" held on April

16 at the Tuxedo Ballroom on 86th Street in Manhattan. Applications for the "Rose of Tralee Contest" were made available by mail, at Gaelic Park, and at the Tuxedo Ballroom. Barth Sheehy, still president of the New York Kerry men's Association and also treasurer of the Festival Committee, served as the chairperson of the dance. Sheila Sullivan, president of the New York Kerry Ladies' Association, was the contest director. The prize for the winner was a "free flight and all expence [sic] paid holiday in Ireland for the girl who represents New York in the final in Tralee on September 4th."³⁶

The evening was sponsored by the Festival Committee whose chairman, the well-known Irish native John "Kerry" O'Donnell, was also active with the local Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). It was no coincidence that the entire Kerry football team from New York, whose captain Paddy Cooper was from Valentia Island, would travel to Ireland for the festival, capitalizing on the opportunity to play a number of GAA football matches during their stay.³⁷

HOMECOMINGS FOR THE ROSES

The young female Kerry immigrants who participated in the early years of the Rose of Tralee Festival experienced a reverse migration, a return home that was both unexpected and celebrated—only the Roses from the diaspora could truly appreciate what the festival had encouraged. Years before, they made the difficult decision to emigrate in the face of challenging socio-economic circumstances if they remained in Ireland. Many feared they would never see their families again once they were settled in America. And yet, once home on Irish soil, the glowing bonfires of welcome that burned in Tralee and neighboring towns and villages were beacons of regeneration and renewal. For the U.S. Roses, the festival was a homecoming that was more like a resurrection than the "American Wake" of the past.

The Rose of Tralee became an exemplar of how to successfully develop local lore into a transatlantic tourist attraction by harnessing the support of Kerry immigrants. American finalists in the Rose of Tralee Festival, whose trips were paid for by their sponsors, had the combined



benefit of participating in the festival and being able to spend time with Irish relatives, thus preserving strong family connections. Noreen Culhane, former executive vice president of

the New York Stock Exchange, whose parents were born in Kerry, recounted her motivation for entering the New York Rose competition. In 1969, while visiting Ireland with her father, she was struck by the emotional intensity of her grandmother's reaction to their arrival. She was "crying, crying, crying, because we were here, and what a blessing we were here."³⁸

Upon returning to America, Culhane tried to convince her father to visit Ireland again the following year to see his mother. His response was, "I have seven children. . . . Well, if you win the Rose of Tralee, I'll go. You know, like, be the New York Rose of Tralee [then] I'll go to Ireland and I'll take everybody." She won and the family headed to Ireland: "We had a big reunion in Kerry. Everybody had a ball." Three decades later, Culhane recalled that while she enjoyed the festival, her memories were bittersweet because fulfilling her responsibilities as the New York Rose necessitated precious time away from her family's joyful reunion.³⁹

Illustration:
Emblem for the Kerry Men's Association in New York. Founded in 1881 and still in operation today, the group was one of the earliest and most active county organizations in New York. The association supported the festival in Tralee from its inception in 1959 when members formed committees to host fundraising dances, select a Rose representative, fund a prize trip to Tralee, and arrange transatlantic charter flights for members wishing to travel to Ireland for the event. Courtesy of James G. O'Shea.



Photo:
In 1948, after her husband Lt. John G. Dwyer was killed during World War II, New Yorker Margaret Dwyer relocated to Tralee, the birthplace of her mother, with her two sons, Ryle and Sean. Dwyer was involved with the festival from the very beginning, traveling to America under the sponsorship of Aer Lingus to promote the event to travel agencies and universities. She used her salesmanship skills and charismatic personality to grow festival participation over the years. In 1970, Dwyer was elected as the first woman president of the festival. This is the couple's wedding photograph taken on September 21, 1942. Courtesy of Sean Dwyer.

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS TO THE SUCCESS

For the first festival, Florence O'Connor, one of the driving forces of the event, recruited Margaret Dwyer, a transplanted New Yorker living in Tralee, to assist with organizing efforts. The daughter of an American father and Irish mother born in Tralee, Dwyer was involved in the inaugural undertaking, adding broader responsibilities through the ensuing decades. She had first visited Tralee in 1936 after high school graduation and considered relocating there but was deterred by the limited economic prospects. In New York, however, she found gainful employment with Trans World Airlines (TWA) and subsequently during World War II, became a radio telephone operator with top security clearance, often connecting calls between President D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill. In 1948, having lost her husband in World War II and with two young sons to support on a war-widow's pension, she decided to

establish permanent residency in Ireland and relocated to Tralee.⁴⁰

The earliest assignment Dwyer assumed was as liaison for the judges responsible for selecting the "Rose of Tralee." When *Aer Lingus* General Manager, Arthur J. Walls, was named as a judge, Dwyer recognized a unique opportunity. Based on her time with TWA, she was aware of the importance of Ireland to immigrants in New York, as well as the significance of potential new transatlantic customers for the airline. The astute businesswoman was successful in convincing Walls to provide her with free transportation to promote the festival in America—an agreement that continued for many years.⁴¹

Dwyer capitalized on the growing interest in Irish-made goods, like Waterford crystal and Donegal tweeds, to increase American participation in the festival. A determined saleswoman, she traveled to eighteen North American cities in 1971 under the auspices of *Aer Lingus* and

Photo:

Aer Lingus was an early sponsor of the Rose of Tralee Festival, transporting U.S. Roses to Ireland through the international gateway in New York. Alice O'Leary, the Rose representative for Boston, and Nora Reidy, the Rose representative for Chicago, are shown here boarding an Irish International Airlines Boeing Shamrock jet at Idlewild Airport in New York (the former name of Kennedy Airport) on their way to Ireland to participate in the 1961 Rose of Tralee pageant. Courtesy of the Boston Globe.



various Irish tourism agencies. Her status as a New Yorker campaigning on behalf of Irish tourism enabled her to gain relatively easy access to media outlets. Dwyer conducted interviews in Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Philadelphia, South Bend, Indiana, and Great Falls, Montana to solicit support for the festival. She met with travel agents to convince them to set up Rose Committees and to send representatives to Ireland. In her lobbying, Dwyer explained that the festival “has that indefinable thing called ‘atmosphere,’ which can waft the spirit of a song into the spirit of a Festival, a gathering, a welcome-home, call it what you like.”⁴²

One of her more successful selling techniques was to visit Catholic universities in America and solicit their help to create charter flights to Ireland in exchange for two free tickets for group leaders. Father Edward Murray, a professor of Irish history at Notre Dame who earned a Ph.D. in Ireland, was especially helpful. He invited Dwyer to speak to his classes in order to encourage his students to visit Ireland. Similar partnerships with American universities resulted in charter flights filled with young people of Irish descent and their families. In reflecting on his mother’s achievements on behalf of regional tourism, Dwyer’s son opined: “Only a New Yorker like my mother could have given Stephen Covey a run for his money where negotiating was concerned.” Based on her many successes in promoting and growing the Kerry Festival and Rose of Tralee Festival, Dwyer was elected the first woman president in 1970.⁴³

Also contributing to the success of the festivals were developments in airline transportation. Transatlantic flights were a particular boon to attracting visitors to the festival. In

April of 1958, *Aerlínte Éireann*, the national airline of Ireland, inaugurated twice-weekly service between New York and Shannon using three Lockheed L-1049 Super Constellation aircraft, leased from the American airline Seaboard and Western.⁴⁴ The advertised round-trip transatlantic airfare was \$417 dollars.⁴⁵ Two years later, the airline introduced a Boeing 720 airplane on the transatlantic route, thus entering the jet age. The modern aircraft significantly reduced the travel time between America and Ireland, making it more appealing and convenient for transatlantic travelers. In 1960, *Aer Lingus* memorialized its affiliation with the Rose of Tralee Festival with a photograph of the New York Rose and festival entourage at Shannon Airport using one of their airplanes as a backdrop. In 1961, two of the American Roses posed on the steps



of an *Aer Lingus* plane in New York for a publicity shot. The importance of this annual opportunity to market the airline became particularly evident in 1962 when the *Aer Lingus* flight from New York, with the American Roses aboard, was diverted due to fog. Upon arrival in Dublin and before

traveling to Tralee, the airline arranged to have the women travel by train to Limerick, then be driven to Shannon, to join others for a commemorative photograph.⁴⁶

The nexus of efforts by *Aer Lingus* and *Bord Fáilte* to expand Ireland’s transatlantic tourism industry, especially by opening offices in a key American market like New York with a large Irish population, bolstered the work of the Festival Committee. The result of their efforts was apparent in 1964 when Tralee hotels sold out and, with the enthusiastic support of locals, up to 1,500 tourists were lodged in private homes due to the shortage of accommodations.⁴⁷

Photo:

The New York Kerryman’s Association organized charter flights on Aer Lingus for their Festival Committee and association members to travel to Ireland in support of their “Rose.” In 1960, upon the group’s arrival at Shannon Airport, members of the Limerick Pipe Band provided a musical welcome to the visitors. Rose representatives from England joined their U.S. counterparts along with festival organizers for a commemorative photograph on the steps of an Irish Airlines’ airplane. This photograph appeared in the Kerryman newspaper on September 3, 1960. Courtesy of the Kerryman .

OTHER FESTIVAL BENEFITS & BENEFICIARIES

To guarantee businesses in the area also benefited from the increased number of visitors, the “Rose of Tralee” and her entourage customarily visited neighboring locales, stopping in towns like Mallow, Listowel, Brosna and Kilgarvan, which was especially meaningful to transatlantic visitors because it was the birthplace of Kerry native Michael Quill, founder and President of the Transport and Workers Union of America (TWU) in New York.⁴⁸

Part of the allure for the young women who entered the Rose of Tralee pageant was the prize packages awarded to the winners.⁴⁹ If the winner of the Rose of Tralee title was from Ireland, England or Europe, the trip was to America and a meeting would be arranged to meet the Mayor of New York. If the winner was an American Rose, the trip was to Europe.⁵⁰

Ann Foley, the 1967 “Rose of Tralee,” won a two-week trip to America.⁵¹ Foley visited New York and had lunch with the mayor along with former New York Roses. She then journeyed to Washington D.C. for a stop at the Irish Embassy before a visit to the White House. There, she was introduced to First Lady, Mrs. Lady Bird Johnson, by Texas Congressman Ray Roberts. For the duration of her trip, Foley was a walking advertisement for Ireland’s couture fashion, wearing tweed suits designed and made in Ireland that were part of her prize winnings.⁵²

Travel agencies in the New York area began offering a special “Rose of Tralee Tour of Ireland.” For example, a two-week excursion included all hotels and meals, tickets to the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, and a medieval banquet at Knappogue Castle in Quin, County Clare. In addition to visiting Tralee for the festival, the tour made stops at the Ring of Kerry, Killarney, Glengariff and Limerick.⁵³ While the festival was certainly the main enticement, the broadened itinerary also helped to meet *Bord Fáilte* tourism goals.

By the mid-1960s, the regional festival had made its mark on Irish transatlantic tourism. An American paper declared, “not many small Irish towns can turn a song into a tourist bonanza, but Tralee, the trim County Kerry capital on the edge of the Atlantic, has done just that. . . . The song is ‘The Rose of Tralee’ and the event. . . annually

converts it into travel-trade cash.”⁵⁴

The initial years of the Rose of Tralee Festival were seminal in structuring transatlantic support through partnerships with Irish immigrants in New York connected with the Kerrymen’s and Kerrywomen’s Associations, *Aer Lingus*, *Bord Fáilte*, and the GAA, as well as with Tralee-based New Yorker Margaret Dwyer. The success of the event was in large part due to their indefatigable efforts and was duly noted in “how magnificently the exiles prove their loyalty. . . . when no appeal from the old country falls on deaf ears.” Their efforts created a veritable “hands-across-the-sea festival.”⁵⁵ A Kerry journalist approvingly commented on this collaborative aspect which drew upon the loyalty and mobilization of the diaspora in America:

*It is unique in the volume of hard work which its organisers [sic]—be they living in New York, Boston, Chicago. . .—have devoted to its fulfillment. . . . I am amazed and more than a little humbled at the thought of the many hundreds of people, in all walks of life, who have contributed to the success of this competition which has fired the imagination. . . . the unsung heroes and heroines of the Festival of Kerry and “Rose of Tralee” competition must not be forgotten.*⁵⁶

Endnotes

Special thanks to Prof. Marion Casey of New York University and Prof. Eric Zuelow of University of New England for their valued insights.

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- 2 Central Statistics Office, *Ireland Census 91, Vol. 1, Population Classified by Area* (Dublin: Stationery Office, June 1993), 24; Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), *1992 Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, October 1993), table 2, “Immigration by Region and Selected Country of Last Residence, Fiscal Years 1820–1992,” 27, cited in Linda Dowling Almeida, *Irish Immigrants in New York City, 1945–1995* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001), 23.

- 3 Linda Dowling Almeida, "A Great Time to Be in America: The Irish in Post-Second World War New York City," in *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s*, ed. Dermot Keogh, Finbarr O'Shea, Carmel Quinlan (Cork: Mercier Press, 2004), 211; J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society*, 6th edition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 335; Linda Dowling Almeida, "Irish America, 1940–2000," in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, ed. J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York UP, 2006), 548.
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- 5 Dorothea Sheats, "I Walked Some Miles," *National Geographic*, May 1, 1951, 675.
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- 11 T. Ryle Dwyer, "First Buds of Rose Festival," *Kerryman*, Aug. 19, 2009. www.independent.ie/regionals/kerryman/lifestyle/first-buds-of-rose-festival-27386240.html (accessed Oct. 15, 2016). The mayor accepted an invitation to travel on one of the charter flights from New York to the inaugural celebration. Due to a State visit from Nikita Khrushchev, he had to cancel. "Flights from U.S. for Festival of Kerry," *Irish Times*, May 25, 1959, 9.
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- 14 "Festival of Kerry," *Kerryman*, Feb. 3, 1962, 23.
- 15 "London Rose of Tralee Dance is Fixed for Wednesday May 25," *Kerryman*, Apr. 30, 1960; "Rose Need No Longer," *Kerryman*, Jan. 27, 1967, 1; "Contest Opened to Any Irish Girl," *Irish Times*, Jan. 26, 1968; "Rose of Tralee Selection Form." blog.roseoftralee.ie/rose-of-tralee-selection-form/ (accessed Nov. 11, 2016).
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- 17 Miriam Nyhan, "County Societies in Irish New York," *American Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 12 (2015), 160, 166, 168.
- 18 Maurice Cantillon, Past President, New York Kerrymen's Association, Telephone Interview by Author, Nov. 14, 2016.
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- 20 Photograph caption, *Irish Advocate*, Aug. 8, 1959, 8; "New York Function," *Kerryman*, July 25, 1959.
- 21 "The Festival of Kerry" Advertisement, *Kerryman*, Aug. 22, 1959, 11.
- 22 Robert Meyer, Jr., "Many Free Festivals for European Tourists," *New York Times*, Feb 22, 1959, 43. In addition to Ireland, the article included a description of free festivals taking place in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, England, Holland, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland, indicating Ireland was now considered a viable European tourism destination.
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