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## Irish Legacy is Alive and Well in East Texas

BY STEVE FREEMAN



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*Beyond the Pale specializes in performing Irish jigs and storytelling lyrics ommon in*

*Irish music. Its members are (left to right) John Delaney, Betsy Cummings, Gordon McLeod, and Christy McLeod. The band appears in Rusk on March 12, Sulphur Springs on May 14, and Winnsboro on November 19.*

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Rumor has it that true Irish don't care much for leprechauns or green beer but other aspects of the Irish lifestyle help define who they are and give insight to those who want to be Irish for a day on St. Patrick's Day.

Being Irish means loving life and lively music, food, and socializing with friends for starters. The Irish are defined as being a relaxed, honest, hard-working people who like to gather for camaraderie and a few pints of beer with others.

"It's good to be Irish," said Jimmy Harris of Quinlan. While admitting his 15-percent Irish connection, he has reconnected with his Irish roots each year for 12 years by volunteering with the North Texas Irish Festival, held at Fair Park, Dallas. The Celtic music provided by 40 bands and the music are reason enough.

Harris said the Irish serve up tasty plates of corned beef and cabbage, potatoes, stew, meatballs and haggis.

Maybe haggis isn't desired by would-be Irish this time of year, but the music is.

"We do reels, jigs, and slides — we do stuff you can dance to," said Christy McLeod. Her Irish band called Beyond the Pale originated in Tyler and still performs throughout the region. The group that together play 14 instruments and sing appear at Rusk's Cherokee Civic Theatre March 12 and at Winnsboro's Bowery Stage November 19, as well as three shows at the North Texas Irish Festival.

Music especially became dear to the Irish who wished to recapture their culture once coming to America, McLeod said.

"Unfortunately, Americans have come to think of all Irish songs as drinking songs, when in reality they are beautiful, melodic songs about love, yearning, tragedy, patriotism and humorous stories."

Immigrants from Ireland flooded the ports of entry in the mid-1800s. Economic,

political, and religious unrest brought them here and today those claiming Irish descent make up the third most numerous European ancestry (34.7 million) in the U.S. after English and German.

In 1991, Congress named March as Irish-American Heritage month, which includes St. Patrick's Day, celebrated on March 17 each year around the world by Irish and non-Irish alike.

While Irish-Americans did not flock to the Upper East Side of Texas in great numbers the state's history does include their stories of contributing to its settlement. Members of the Thomas Breen family of Mineola served as postmasters, city commissioners, and business leaders. Crockett native W.V. McConnell, described as witty Irish storyteller, opened a mercantile store there that operated 50 years after his death.

Two places of interest include Nacogdoches County's 40,000-acre San Patricio Rancho (named after Saint Patrick), a 1797 venture by two Irishmen to trade with the Native Americans and provide supplies to soldiers. The other is the old Shelby County Courthouse in Center built to resemble an Irish Romanesque-style castle by J.J.E. Gibson. Born in Dublin, he trained as an architect, migrated to America in the late 1800s, and landed in Shelby where he bid for the courthouse project.

Four Irishmen signed the Texas Declaration of Independence and 100 fought in the Battle of San Jacinto. The 1850 census counted 1,400 Irish in Texas and some 130 years later, more than a half million called Texas home.



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