

Brief History of Saint Patrick's Parties in Elk

Saint Patrick's parties in Greenwood (Elk) were first documented by the Mendocino *Beacon* in 1893 and members of the Blessed Sacrament Church have been hosting them every year since then. It has been said that it is the longest running annual party in the County of Mendocino taking place every March for well over a century. The celebration was first documented in a March 3, 1893 article in the Mendocino *Beacon* as a "grand ball in Greenwood on St. Patrick's night. Prizes will be awarded as follows: To the most graceful lady and gentleman dancers and to the most improved gentleman and lady pupils."

The tradition continues from that time to the present. This March 17th we will be celebrating our 125th annual Saint Patrick's Party at the Greenwood Community Center in Elk. The event has been a significant part of Greenwood/Elk for decades. It has been a time when old friends and family and new friends have come from far and wide to gather, catch up on news, socialize and just have a grand time enjoying a delicious dinner and having the chance to win some grand prizes.

Although first documented in 1893, it is known that the Saint Patrick's revelry actually began prior to that in Cuffey's Cove which was located about 1 mile north of present-day Greenwood/Elk. The younger generation of Irish lads organized calling themselves "The Native Sons of Little Ireland" and sponsored the St. Patrick's Day dance parties as a benefit for the Catholic Church in Cuffey's Cove, St. Mary's Star of the Sea. With the abandonment of Cuffey's Cove because of fire and the construction of a mill further south, the Church of the Blessed Sacrament was constructed in 1896 in Greenwood and the Catholic Ladies of the new church took over the practice of putting on the event.

The Catholic Ladies, however, were not the only organization involved in throwing the all-night Saint Patrick's parties in the early years. The Native Sons of Little Ireland continued to take part in sponsoring the events. The March 17, 1900 Saint Patrick's Ball "was given under the auspices of the N.S.L.I. along with the cooperation of the newly formed Civic Club" according to an article in the Mendocino *Beacon*. Various other groups in Elk also pitched in to make the merrymaking a success. For example, the 1905 and 1907 balls were given by the Native Daughters of the Golden West. In 1917 the Civic Club put on the ball and the following year cooperated once again with the Native Sons of Little Ireland in holding the ball at the Greenwood Civic Club Hall.

Elk, known as Greenwood in those days, was a fairly sizeable community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with a population of around 1000 or so. One must bear in mind that there were few forms of leisure activity a hundred years ago and a dance was a genuinely important form of entertainment. Saint Patrick's parties in Greenwood were considered one of the main events along the Mendocino Coast for decades drawing eager merry makers from Fort Bragg to Gualala with representatives from all the communities in between as well as the logging camps up Greenwood Creek and Elk

Creek and inland from Willits, Ukiah, Boonville and from as far away as San Francisco. In the very early days people arrived by horse and buggy or walked from neighboring towns for the merry making more often than not braving torrents of rain and difficult muddy roads. It was not uncommon for party goers to begin arriving in the town several days in advance of the event staying at hotels or with family and friends. On occasion, the party was so well attended that it took two halls and two bands to accommodate the crowds!

Saint Patrick's Ball was always held on Saturday nights with the exception of March 1945 when, due to increased fighting in the Pacific, it was changed to Sunday from 2:00pm until midnight because of a wartime curfew. In 1970 and 1971 it was held in Point Arena but still sponsored by the Catholic Ladies of Elk in cooperation with St. Aloysius in Point Arena. This was due to the Union Hall having closed in Elk and before the present-day Community Center was constructed.

The format of the party has changed over the past 125 years, of course. Vaudeville performances and masquerades where people dressed up in elaborate costumes were a part of the early Saint Patrick's Balls. Singers, violinists, pianists and comedians provided entertainment winning the admiration of enthusiastic party goers. Dancing lasted throughout the night until the wee hours of the morning when a hat was passed for the musicians and coffee served to bleary eyed party goers before they headed home. Dances were held in the Greenwood Hall and later the Union Hall, with supper served in the Greenwood Hotel or other eateries in town. Midnight snacks of sandwiches and refreshments would be provided by the Catholic Ladies. In the very early years, the party was primarily a dance with folks eating dinner at a pre-party get together at the home of friends or in one of the local restaurants. However, it eventually evolved to a dinner and dance, but not always corned beef and cabbage as is served today. The 1971 dinner to honor Ireland's patron saint consisted of homemade, old fashioned Italian Ravioli and Chicken. 4,200 raviolis were made for the event taking 4 weekends. Subsequent years saw chicken and spaghetti dinners and in 1974 the food committee decided to serve chicken cacciatore with polenta and apple pie *a la mode* for dessert. The delicious Italian dinners have since evolved into what is considered the traditional Irish-American Saint Patrick's celebratory meal of corned beef and cabbage.

Raffle prizes appeared in the 30s with the first prize being a "market basket" comprised of generous donations from many friends. Eventually the raffle evolved to consist of a few more prizes which were put on display for all to see at Buchanan's Store (today the Elk Store). The first mention of a Hope Chest as first prize was in 1939 and it too was displayed at the store. The Saint Patrick's Ball was so well known along the coast that the Hope Chest was even put on display in Fort Bragg for people to view and purchase their raffle tickets prior to the chest being brought to Elk. A completely filled hope chest remains to this day, some 79 years later, the first prize in the raffle drawing.

Music was generally violin, guitar and piano in the early years. In later years music was provided by local orchestras such as the Greenwood Hometown Harmony Boys in the

late 20s and later Ruben's Four in the 30s. Another local group was called the "melody Mixers." Over the past several decades a variety of bands with many styles of music have played at the Saint Patrick's event from local groups to others from Ukiah, Fort Bragg, Boonville, Santa Rosa, Petaluma and so on.

The town of Elk has dwindled in population since the early part of the 20th century. Most of the descendants of the Native Sons of little Ireland have moved away as have the descendants of the Italians, Scandinavians and others who settled here to work in the forests and the mill. But this one annual event has remained a focal point for those who moved far and wide drawing them back to the little town to reminisce fond memories of days past. Some former residents have come from as far away as Utah to say nothing of the far reaches of California. The party has been an occasion to renew relationships with old friends and relatives as well as make new friendships.

Over the years the St. Patrick's Dance ceased to be an affair put on by the Irish Catholics. Even by the 40s it had become a part of the community - a tradition. Perhaps the spirit of cooperation was best expressed by Mary Boyle Burke (1868-1956) when she wrote in an article for the Mendocino Beacon in 1943: "A perennially characteristic feature of the Greenwood St. Patrick's dance is the splendid cooperation of non-Catholics in production of a church benefit, which though under Catholic patronage, they have benevolently adopted as their own. The generous donation of labor and goods is an inspiring and edifying example of religious tolerance and social good will. God grant that this spirit may never cease."

The spirit spoken of by Ms. Burke 75 years ago has not ceased in Greenwood/Elk where people from diverse backgrounds and viewpoints live in harmony. She would be proud.