

Her Day in the Sun

For generations, the St. Patrick's Day parade has shined as a beacon of Irish heritage in Morristown. This year, however, with a virus rampant, there were no pipers piercing away the doldrums, no tiny dancers stepping into our hearts, no friendly men in burley white sweaters ferrying a blessed flag along South Street. We wait and hope for the day when the merriment will be back again.

The Grand Marshal of the 2020 parade was to have been Mary Waller, the local matriarch who has stitched together the fabric of this celebration for the last twenty years. Though Mary was robbed of her day in the sun as this year's Grand Marshal, we can still use this unscheduled pause to remember our history and pay tribute to Mary for all her contributions to this annual event and to the Irish community during the past two decades.

It was nearly 300 years ago, in 1740, when West Hanover was renamed Morristown in honor of Lewis Morris, Governor of the colony. At the time, General George Washington was headquartered in the center of town, helming a brutal war. In recognition of his many brave Irish troops, without whom he could not succeed in this country's battle for independence, Washington declared March 17, 1780 "St. Patrick's Day."

Fast-forward to 1979, when the locals cobbled together the first parade in Warton. Ed Hansberry, a former Grand Marshal, recalls, "I was one of the three lads that put together the parade in Warton in 1979. People were worried about what it would cost." Yet the parade grew significantly, and in 1991, moved to Morristown. "We never imagined this thing would get so big! It is unbelievable what it has done for Morristown."

John Murphy, who preceded Mary as Grand Marshal, says "There are a lot of things in Morris County that you can't quantify. We are a AAA rated county because of our balance sheet, and we are one of the more affluent counties in the country. But what you can't see in those stats is what creates a quality of life here, like the Irish community." John gets choked up when he speaks of his own parents coming from Ireland, working hard and raising seven kids.

Kathleen Hyland, the first and only other female former Grand Marshal says, "I've lived all my 80 years in Morristown. My mother was from Ireland, my father's parents were from Ireland. I knew that the parade would be successful here, with Old Dublin, and so many old friends living nearby. Several people my age stayed in the area, and then Jim Hennessey opened a bar here. People love their heritage. They all stayed close."

Staying close would prove a particularly difficult challenge for Mary's family as they faced the Great Depression of the 1930's, the tuberculosis epidemic, and the hardships of men going off to war in the early 1940's. Yet she finds value in the hardship. "People are a product of their life experiences," Mary says. "Struggles bring resilience. To me, this describes the Irish."

Mary's Irish ancestors emigrated to NYC between 1845 and 1850. In 1926, her mother rode through the Holland Tunnel the day it opened with her grandparents, Michael and Anna Boyle of Hoboken. Michael was active in politics and owned a Ford Dealership.

Mary's parents, Maurice and Mary (Hawkes) O'Connell married and had four girls within five years. Mary, the oldest, was born in Jersey City in 1938.

"When I was five years old, my mother and five of her family members were diagnosed with tuberculosis. They were isolated in Pollak Tuberculosis Hospital in Jersey City. There, my mother, her mother and her two brothers died." The deaths tore the Roman Catholic family

apart, literally, with Mary and two of her sisters sent off to St. Francis Home in Union City and their baby sister elsewhere.

Subsequently, Mary went to live in Jersey City with her paternal grandparents Patrick O'Connell from Dingle, Kerry, and Julia O'Callaghan from Macroom, Cork. "They were eager to start a life in America and proud to be Irish," Mary recalls. "I'm grateful for the Irish foundation they provided me."

Then, tragedy struck again. "My grandmother suddenly died of a heart attack," Mary says. At that point, all four O'Connell girls were reunited and sent to the Jersey City Home for the Homeless at 78 Summit Avenue.

Sheila Moore, Mary's younger sister by four years, remembers the family dislocations vividly. "Mother died when we were very young, but we were separated from the time I was a year old. Mary was 5. We went into the orphanage, and on that day, Mary became like a very tiny adult. Someone told her to take care of your sisters, and she took that very seriously. Mary did not want us to feel alone. She held us together as a family and she gave us stability. We were a family, and she would never let us forget that. Irish women are known to be strong, stable, and they do whatever has to be done to get through things. Having her as a sister was a Godsend. I had no Mother. Mary was the only role model I ever had."

Although the structure at the home was rigid, it provided stability. "I was taught life skills that proved to be useful— learning to clean, sew, and set a table; but above all, manners," Sheila says. "Proper etiquette helped us to feel comfortable in social gatherings."

Mary, meanwhile, was diagnosed during adolescence with a rheumatic heart. As a result, she was ferried each day by school bus to the A. Harry Moore School for Handicapped Children in Jersey City. "They taught regular studies and gave lessons in several trades. I had music, economics, and 8th grade dentistry. I graduated top of the class." Mary remembers her picture featured in the *Jersey Journal* receiving a Bulova watch from the Superintendent of Schools. "It was beautiful, I could not take my eyes off that watch! It was the biggest shock of my life; I had my picture taken."

Mary received a four-year scholarship to Saint Aloysius High School. "We wore a school uniform, thank God. For the first time I was dressed the same as everyone else and I could keep my secret about living in the home. Most of the students were of Irish decent. We were taught by priests and The Sisters of Charity. What an amazing gift I was given! I felt so special!"

In 1958 Mary married Kenneth Waller, who was serving in the US Army, stationed at the Nike Ajax Site in Berkeley, CA. "I joined him, and after two years we returned to Jersey City and started a family." Together, they had five children (and eventually 12 grandchildren). "Shortly after the birth of my fifth child, Ken was diagnosed with arteriosclerosis, and he suffered a debilitating stroke when he was 40 and was then unable to work." Ever resourceful, Mary found employment at the Secaucus Town Hall in the Construction Department, then as secretary to Fire Inspector and Municipal Court clerk, along the way furthering her education in Public Administration. "I was then asked to work for the State of New Jersey as a Chief Legislative Aide," she says. "I enjoyed my work serving others and being able to assist people who needed help and guidance."

Having been "a recipient of much kindness in my life," she continues, "I've looked for a way of giving back." Toward that end, she is a member of the Irish American Association Northwest New Jersey, Secretary of the St. Patrick's Day Parade, and a member of the Pre-Parade

Entertainment Committee. Mary is also a founding member of the Sisters of Saint Brigid in Morristown, and is recognized as their 2020 Woman of the Year.

“Since the time I lived with my emigrant grandparents, I felt a strong attachment to being Irish,” she says. “Learning about Irish history is emotional because of the centuries of tragic persecution and never-ending struggles and hardships. But I learned at an early age to press on, to persevere. Together, as families, and as a community, despite whatever odds, we can accomplish anything.”

Other parade Grand Marshals are grateful for Mary’s many contributions. “Mary did a lot of things for the parade very quietly,” says John Murphy. “She never looked for headlines or fanfare. For decades she has been working behind the scenes, making this parade the biggest family event in the state. Yet, Mary is one of the most remarkable people I know. Despite her upbringing and the bumps in the road, this is a woman who you never heard a negative word from, who always has a smile on her face. She has been

good at creating a Plan B when we need one. Mary became a leader, she provided for her family. That is what people with strong perseverance can do.”

Such perseverance is a hallmark of the community. “When I think of some of these Grand Marshals, from Eddy Hansberry, to Monsignor Corr, to Jimmy Hennessey and on and on, their thumbprints are all over this community,” John says.

Kathleen Hyland agrees. “Several people got the ball rolling and made it work – Jimmy Mongey, Jimmy Dangler, Mike Quinn, it was a good group of people who loved their heritage.” But to her mind, Mary knows more about Irish heritage than anyone. “She is a great lady, and this honor is well-deserved,” she says. “Mary loves her heritage. She is a model for any woman, and especially for all Irish women promoting our heritage.”

So, while we wait for our beloved parade to return, let us use this moment to remember our history, to honor the Irish heritage, and, above all, to pay a well-deserved tribute to Mary Waller, the one who has fostered and enhanced this annual parade for the last twenty years. A model of perseverance, who has given back to all of us, time and again, as we stand by the curb, cheering the tiny dancers and the pipes and drums. Let us shine a ray of sunlight on this remarkable marshal, the one we appropriately call Grand.

- *James Kevin O’Hern, 2020*

