

Monday's Commentary

St. Joe's fans win against Green team

St. Patrick's Day, bah humbug. It's not that I have anything against the Irish, though I think swigging green brew is rather repulsive, but St. Pat's Day always reminds me of the rivalry that existed between the Polish and the Irish on this holiday when I was in high school.

At Rosary, a Catholic girls school in Detroit, our student body was just about half Irish and half Polish. At least 90 percent of the student body was one or the other or, God forbid, both.

The lay teachers and nuns also fit the same pattern. So the month of March always brought the problem of how to celebrate St. Patrick's Day and St. Joseph's Day with equal fervor. The solution inevitably was a tug-of-war. Ethnic pride being what it is, both groups wanted to outshine the other. What better way than a cut and dry contest with winners and losers.

Let me digress a moment. Somewhere in history, St. Joseph, who celebrated his feast day March 19, became the patron saint of the Polish. Okay, so he's not Polish, but St. Patrick isn't Irish, either.

Red and white being the national colors of Poland, many Poles took to the tradition of wearing red on St. Joseph's Day. Other than that, marking the occasion is



Mélange

by
Mary Gniwewek



usually minimal. Some radio stations have been known to play a full program of polkas.

AT ROSARY, the heat was on by the first of March

The tug-of-war competition was serious business. The first step was to select a student from each homeroom (one Polish, one Irish) to participate. Not to stereotype, but we Poles always seemed to have size on our side.

The competition was always held in the school gym on St. Patrick's Day. But even with the luck of their patron saint on his special day, the Irish couldn't win.

Each year, the Polish team consisted of a couple dozen big muscular girls. The kind you wouldn't want to mess with. They strutted to the center of the gym, flexing their muscles through red T-shirts.

Without exception, the Irish team always consisted of wussy little freckled lasses, many with green ribbons in their hair and little shamrock pins on their blouses.

We fans in the stands were segregated — red on one side, green on the other. The few blacks and Italians just kind of stood around in the corners. The Polish and Irish faculty served as masters of ceremony, getting in their little ethnic digs with the introductions and build-up.

But it was never really any match. Either the Irish weren't putting their real strength on the front line or Rosary had a weak Irish population. After five minutes of tugging and pulling, the Poles won every time.

Ah, sweet victory, though it was short-lived. Outside the gym, the mood was definitely Irish, the emphasis, St. Patrick. Oh well, you can't win them all.

Happy St. Joseph's Day.

Irish curmudgeon shows how it's done on St. Patrick's Day

By MIKE SCANLON

St. Patrick's Day is right around the corner. I know that because of my friend Charley.

Charley is one of those who thinks the last good day for the American Way of Life was sometime in August 1952. Things in the world at large, and things in Detroit especially, have been headed straight down the tubes ever since.

IN CHARLEY'S BOOK today's major league baseball players wouldn't have made the Little League in the old days. Nothing is like it was in the old days — not mass transit, women, beer, nor the shuffleboard in his neighborhood bar. The list goes on, but you get the idea.

Charley is 42 now, which means he reached what he still thinks was the prime of life at age 15. But his happiest days won't be until he's about 80, when he'll look as much like a curmudgeon as he feels.

And even jaded Charley is looking forward to St. Patrick's Day. With relish.

Even longing.

"I'm going to start off at The Dublin Inn at 7," he was saying the other night, with a twinkle — or glaze — in his eye. "Unless I'm still drunk."

Charley was talking about the tradition of St. Patrick's Day. With relish.

Charley was a letter carrier, so he is used to getting an early start on the day.

But he retired last year and now he has about 20 years to kill before his pension kicks in. Why Charley retired at the age of 42 is a long, complex tale, but it roughly boils down to Charley's belief that the U.S. Postal Service has also been going downhill since 1952.

HE HAS TO DO something with his time, and signing unemployment checks can only be stretched out so far. What he does is quite literally spend 18 hours a day in the bar, drinking beer and talking about how things aren't what they used to be.

That's when he's feeling right up to snuff. If he's got a touch of the flu or something, he cuts the workday to maybe 10 or 12 hours.

Even on the slow days he is awesome to behold. Watching him in action leads to fervent prayers for the Stroh Brewing Co. to begin publicly trading stock.

Charley's plan of action is to get in a few wind sprints at The Dublin Inn before heading downtown for the big parade. Not that he plans on watching the parade.

What he's going to do is settle in at the Gaelic League.

"That way, I know I'll get a good seat," he explained. When the marchers come in after the parade, he will ask them if it was a long walk.

The uplifting thing about Charley's attitude toward St. Patrick's Day is that it exactly mirrors my own. If Christmas is for children, St. Patrick's

Charley's plan of action is to get in a few wind sprints at the Dublin Inn before heading downtown for the big parade. Not that he plans on watching the parade. What he's going to do is settle in at the Gaelic League. When the marchers come in after the parade, he will ask them if it was a long walk.

Day is for curmudgeons.

At least, that's how it is in America. People bothered by legalities couldn't even get a drink in most of Ireland on St. Patrick's Day until a few years back, when the Catholic church put St. Patrick on probation. St. Patrick's Day was a holy day of obligation, and Catholics are required to attend Mass. Having a good time in a country as Catholic as Ireland on a holy day of obligation is just a little tacky.

Beginning two or three years after Charley thinks the whole world started going downhill my two Irish parents made me a regular communicant at American-style St. Patrick's Day parades.

My earliest memories of the experience concern striding down Woodward Ave. swinging a blackthorn shillelagh. In later years, I was one of a handful of boys who touted various huge, heavy flags, mounted on thick wooden poles 10 or 12 feet long. These flags were edged with gold braid and treated like the relics of saints. Carrying them was an honor for at least a block, and after that carrying them was an ordeal which is probably why the kids did it.

Afterward, we always ended in the Gaelic League, an Irish club attached to a bar near Tiger Stadium.

80-YEAR OLD CURMUDGEONS would launch into keening laments on the sad decline of the world since English replaced Gaelic as the everyday tongue of Ireland. Now and then an odd chortle would fill the room and glasses raised in celebration of the century's lone high point — the decline of the British Empire.

Then they would stoop down from their stools at the bar to rub their hands through his hair, telling me I had my uncle's nose. Invariably, they would also give my bicep an affectionate squeeze, a gesture that delivered terrible pain on those days when I had just carried the flag.

I could hardly wait to get home.

Of course, now that I am training to be a curmudgeon I can hardly wait to get there. You can find me by the door, next to Charley, waiting to find out if the parade has gotten any shorter.



Irish will be everyone's ethnic heritage this Saturday as many folks around town gather at the local watering holes to enjoy celebrating St. Patrick's Day.

When I was a kid... Magic seeker gives hocus pocus focus

I hate it when my story starts out with the line "When I was a kid."

But bear with me. Besides, if you want to get technical this column started out with "I hate it when."

As I was saying, before I rudely interrupted myself when I was a kid I and a friend took the DSR bus downtown one day to look for a magic shop. Somebody told us was near Hudson's.

We must've walked a couple miles all the way down to the Stone Boulders and back, looking for this elusive magic shop. Finally, somebody told us that the place closed the year before.

I can't remember what item we were looking for, but I'll bet it was a magic trick. That was too much work and too sophisticated for us. I think I wanted to buy one of those bald wigs or a bow tie that glows in the dark. Real high-class merchandise guaranteed to make the girls in the eighth grade giggle.

Not finding any bald wigs during the venture downtown, I later clipped a coupon from a comic book and mailed away for one. It had the flesh tone of a badly-embalmed corpse and my brush cut could be seen underneath the layer.

Now if I had found a place to peruse

The Flip Side

by craig piechura

the merchandise before my purchase. I wouldn't have wasted my paper route earnings on something stupid like a bald wig. I would've waited my money on something cool like itching powder or X-ray specs. If only the magic store was still around.

TAKE HEART, mischievous kids, and fledgling magicians. Such a store still exists. And you don't have to prow through urban streets and climb dingy flights of stairs to get there. The Emporium of Magic is thriving in suburbia located in the Tel-Ek Shopping Center on Telegraph, just north of Ten Mile, in Southfield.

A better-equipped magic store is hard to imagine. Under one roof there are thousands of magic tricks and ratas, legions to order thousands more. Every thing from the \$3 color silk to the \$2,100 Cut a Woman in Half contraption. Just the thing for the mystagogue on your gift list.

For kids and traveling salesman the store carries a complete line of gag items. There's the ugly teeth, the bloody finger gag, the fake snake, plastic balls and plastic wala, guaranteed to amuse your friends and infuriate your mother.

There are howl like that light up, the fly on a spoon, the fog in a sock, rubber eggs, squirting toilet seats, chattering teeth, black soap and those different flavors of gum — garlic, gum

but gum and super-sour gum.

Remember cigarette loads? They've got 'em. You must be 14 to buy, any practical joke that could inflict bodily harm, such as the bang matches, sparking matches and the Blue Devil cigarette loads.

WHY? THE MAN responsible for bringing this renaissance of fun to a suburban setting? It's Max Ettlinger, 32, of Ferndale, a professional magician for the past 22 years and a former financial consultant.

Ten years ago Ettlinger started the magic shop as a sideline or a hobby, "to fill the void."

He remembers how his parents would chew him out for going to "filthy, cluttered places" that sold magic and would ask, "What kind of junk did you bring back now?"

Although I always looked forward to finding a really magic shop, Ettlinger said the store was a disappointment to anyone remotely interested in real magic.

"Magic companies or magic shops were usually second rate shops that used to submit on the second floor and you had to walk up a grimy flight of stairs to get there. They're run by old men who aren't competent and unable to guide young men and women interested in magic."

At Max's store, the salesman will get up on the stage and perform an illusion.

If you're thinking of buying it, I'd advise in magic are taught regularly in the lecture hall in the rear of the store. A magician's job starts there the second Thursday of every month. To join, you must prove your proficiency at prestidigitation the old sleight of hand.

"THIS IS ALL very important," says Ettlinger. "Magic is a craft, it's not a boy or a game."

Many customers at the store, which opened last July, will never be magicians. They want to learn a trick or two to impress the people at work or entertain at a party. Ettlinger said interest in magic peaked about five years ago, but there will always be a steady demand to watch it.

The public's interest in magic is starting to plateau, he said. "Most people would like to see magic. Few would like to perform it."

Does that mean that most people are really want to believe the tricks are magic and not a trick?

"The trickiest lies to be fooled," Ettlinger said, "likely walks to be made a fool of. That line in the comic book, 'The life of the party, people like to be fooled,' is absolute unalike."

So, if you're looking to unlock the secrets of Springfield and don't want to get grimy in the process, visit The Emporium of Magic.

A word of advice from one who knows: steer clear of the bald wigs.

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