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Article Summary: Anti-Irish feeling in the mid-nineteenth century led Irish immigrants in Nebraska to celebrate St Patrick's Day with parades, religious services, balls, and some rowdiness. By World War I most Americans had joined the celebration, happy to be considered Irish for a day.

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Photographs / Images: St Andre D Balcombe, editor of the *Omaha Republican*; St Philomena's Church; Edward Creighton; St Mary's Roman Catholic Church; Bishop James O'Connor; Constantine J Smyth, Nebraska attorney general; Bishop Richard Scannell; postcard with caricatures of the Irish; James E Boyd

Wearin' of the Green

The Irish and Saint Patrick's Day

in Omaha

By Tommy R. Thompson

By the time Irish immigrants arrived in the frontier city of Omaha, their reputation was already established, much to their detriment. Often coming to America poverty stricken, the men sought jobs constructing canals and railroads and as building contractors and dock workers, while young women often found positions as house servants. Protestant workers in the United States feared the Irish as competitors and easily linked this concern with a dislike for their Catholicism, a prejudice present since the American colonial era. Besides the rivalry over employment, Irish men, often underemployed, unemployed, or traveling great distances to find work, gained a reputation for wife beating and desertion. Many found themselves in jails, poorhouses, and mental institutions. And, of course, there was the alcohol. With a strong tradition of drinking in Ireland, the Irish continued the habit in America, where they encountered a temperance movement supported by rapidly developing Protestant evangelical sects. Much of the anti-Irish feeling boiled over into the Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s, which was embraced by many members of the Republican Party but rejected by the Democrats, who tried to draw in the Irish to support slavery. By the post-Civil War era, the Irish immigrants had to bear some heavy baggage, and they carried it with them as they came to Omaha. Part of that baggage was the American Irish use of Saint Patrick's Day as a symbol of alienation and defiance.

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St. Andre D. Balcombe edited the *Omaha Republican* from 1866 to 1871 and remained a major stockholder until 1876.
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Saint Patrick's Day was not the only festivity that drew attention to the Irish in the city. Irish nationalist groups also developed. The Hibernian Benevolent Society, for example, was founded in the 1860s to provide "mutual benevolence, social intercommunion, aiding and affording advice to immigrants seeking homes in Nebraska." And the Fenian Brotherhood with "circles" (groups within the organization) such as the "Shamrock" planned various

social events, including "a grand Ball" in 1867. However, since Saint Patrick's Day occurred annually and drew national attention to the Irish, it deserves special attention.¹

One of the earliest public notices of Saint Patrick's Day in Omaha occurred in the mid-1860s when the *Omaha Republican* expressed the hope that the day "will be observed with appropriate religious ceremonies," a faintly disguised suggestion that the city's Irish residents worship at the church rather than at the saloon. As a key partisan journal in Omaha, the *Republican* reflected the Grand Old Party's Know-Nothing roots of the 1850s with its anti-Irish rhetoric and, of course, its dislike for a group supportive of the rival Democratic Party. Saint Patrick's Day presented the best opportunity of the year to launch a diatribe, although the *Republican* made it a habit for years to remind the Irish of their baggage. Soon after the newspaper's comment regarding Saint Patrick's Day, for example, the *Republican* printed a typical anti-Irish tale of a woman's Irish servant, "Miss Bridget," who went "out calling" to return to her employer's residence to ask arrogantly, "Missus, have you got tea ready?" On the other hand, in these early years of the sixties and seventies, the equally vitriolic Democratic organ, the *Omaha Daily Herald*, continually rose to the defense of the Irish with each attack and responded with even more vicious denunciation of African Americans, a Republican Party interest group. For the next several years these two newspapers virtually warred with each other, with the Irish and the

The Irish and St. Patrick's Day

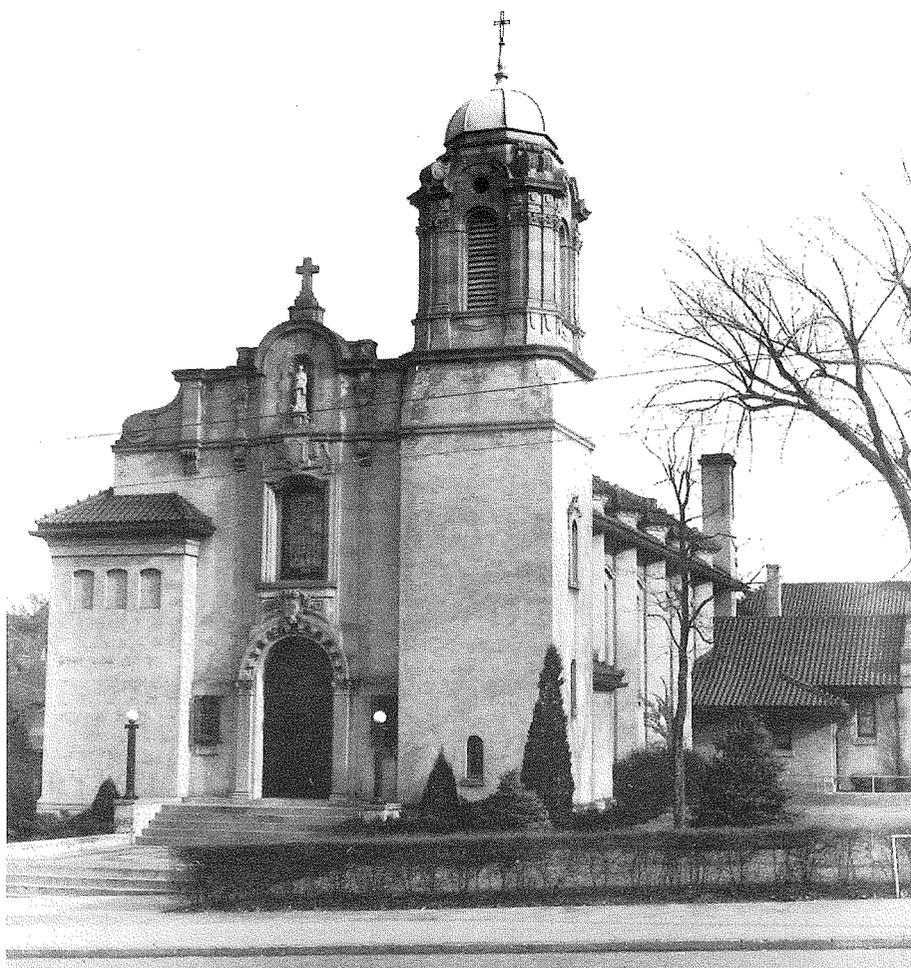
African Americans the victims.²

It was the 1870s before Omaha newspapers recognized Saint Patrick's Day on a regular basis. Possibly by the late sixties, but definitely by the early seventies, parades were part of an Irish celebration in the city. In 1872 the *Republican* (weekly edition) reported that the "wearing of the green was epidemic; green ties and bows were seen on every hand" and that a large number of the city's Irish turned out for a parade that wound through the business district. Following the parade the people gathered at Shoaf's Hall to hear an address on the history of Ireland and Saint Patrick, and in the evening there was a "grand vocal and instrumental concert" by the St. Philomon choir and the Concordia Society and a ball (apparently the third annual ball hosted by the Emmett Monument Association), "a brilliant party." Not surprisingly, the *Republican* spiced its coverage of Saint Patrick's Day with numerous comments regarding the behavior of the Irish. Blatantly the newspaper proclaimed:

During the entire afternoon we did not see one person who was under the influence of liquor, and the entire affair was as quiet and orderly as any celebration that has ever taken place in this city.

And in an article immediately following the detailing of Saint Patrick's Day festivities, the newspaper reported that there was "no business before the Police Court" on March 18. "As it was the day succeeding St. Patrick's anniversary, we regard the above as a significant fact."³

In the following year, 1873, the Saint Patrick's Day parade was even more spectacular. The city awakened to a beautiful day, ready to greet the Irish in a grand way. Crowds filled the streets early with Irish men wearing green neckties and women and children be-necked in green dresses, bonnets, ribbons, and bows. American and Irish flags and banners hung from the major buildings on Farnam and Douglas streets. As the *Daily Herald* proclaimed, Omaha greeted the day with



St. Philomena's Church. NSHS-2341-215

its skies as fair as the fondest imagination could suggest. Balmy airs blew when there was any motion, and Nature seemed to smile upon the efforts of the sons and daughters of Erin to recall here in the far off land of their adoption the memories and traditions of their old homes and hearthstones.

Composed of bands, the mayor and city council members, the fire department, the Temperance Society (probably encouraged by the Irish to participate for obvious reasons), military units, the "Maid of Ireland" (Kate O'Brien) in a carriage, and others, the procession moved along Farnam to Saint Philomena's Catholic cathedral on Ninth Street, where Bishop James

O'Gorman performed High Mass. Following the service, the parade participants proceeded to Redick's Opera House to listen to featured speaker John O'Keefe of Omaha, "a careful student of Irish history," tell them that freedom would soon come to Ireland. The day's festivities ended with a ball once again at Shoaf's Hall hosted by the Emmett Monument Association. Continuing its verbal war of the past years, the *Daily Herald* proclaimed that the Saint Patrick's Day parade was "one of the most beautiful sights our city has ever beheld." The *Republican* declared only that the procession was "in exceedingly good taste."⁴

Both in Omaha and the nation the reaction to the Irish in America continued in the seventies and often surfaced around Saint Patrick's Day, but also occurred at other times. Nationally, *Harper's Weekly* in the spring of 1873 contained numerous articles and cartoons attacking Catholicism and the Irish. In late March the magazine depicted a brutish Irishman dressed in his Irish regalia commencing Saint Patrick's Day proudly looking at himself in the mirror and ending the day staring blankly at an empty glass and bottle of whiskey. Counterattacking, the highly influential *Irish World* of New York City, a pro-Ireland, pro-Catholic journal subscribed to by some Omaha Irish, declared that this was a stereotype proven false by the many newspaper accounts from across the country of orderly Saint Patrick's Day celebrations. Locally, in a more subtle manner, newspaper reports of crimes committed by the city's Irish may have produced bias among some Omaha residents. The *Republican*, which often designated the nationality or race (African American, not Caucasian) of an accused individual (a "Swede," a "colored man"), generally did not label a miscreant an "Irishman." Of course, a name often revealed one's ethnic identity. No one could miss that Bridget Flaherty and Patsey O'Neill, arrested in June 1873 as "inmates of a disorderly house," were Irish or that Mollie Flynn, charged as madam of the "notorious bawdy house" on Twelfth Street later that summer, also came from the land of Erin.⁵

At other times, such organs as the *Republican* more blatantly revealed a dislike for the Irish. An article near the Fourth of July in 1873 repeated a supposed story that someone had heard a local Irishman say that he was going to sit on his porch beneath an American flag with a barrel of whiskey and drink until all he saw were flags. And yet the *Republican* liked those Irish who voted Republican, as apparently some did in the fall of 1873. These Irish had "ignored" the Democratic "Court House

ring" and acted as "good Americans" voting for the "principles of true liberty." It was also clear that class and money mattered. The *Republican* praised highly successful Omahan Edward Creighton, president of the First National Bank and Democratic Party member, for financing the construction of another building in the city, even though "we think him on the wrong side of politics."⁶



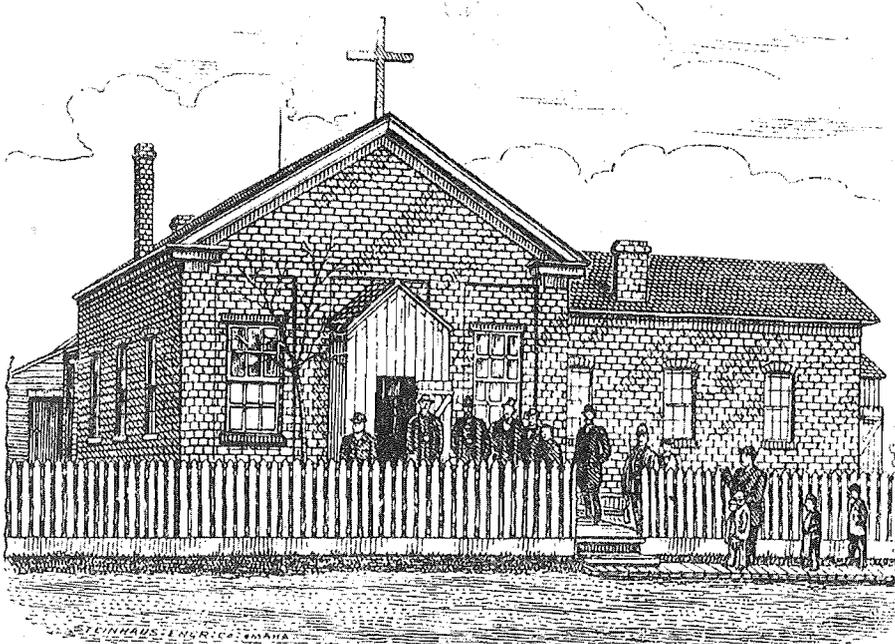
Edward Creighton. NSHS-RG2411-6947

Meanwhile the celebration of Saint Patrick's Day continued in Omaha. In 1874 a drenching storm that muddied the streets led to the canceling of the parade, but there was still High Mass and a ball sponsored by the Emmet Monument Association. At the latter John O'Keefe once again spoke on the glory of Ireland, while John J. Mullaney of Dubuque, Iowa, delivered a "somewhat lengthier address" on seven centuries of strife between England and Ireland. In the following year a group meeting at the Emmet Monument Association hall decided not to have the "usual parade" but to have an extensive celebration the next year. There would still be the typical ball, now at Creighton

Hall located at Fifteenth and Harney. Perhaps innocently, the *Republican* commented that "of course, the ball will be the greatest kind of success," but with past suspicions lurking, a member of the Emmet Monument Association immediately denounced the remark as a "slur." While the *Republican* claimed it intended no malice, the newspaper could not help telling its readers that Saint Patrick's Day was "celebrated quietly." Actually, any Irish reader of the *Republican* should have taken much greater offense for a story published the previous December that exemplified the type of comment that continued to provoke anti-Irish feeling in the city. At that time the *Republican* noted that one Mrs. Dinan had passed away. The article related that she had appeared in police court many times to levy complaints against her husband, Pat, and had not drawn "a sober breath" in many years. In short, she was a sacrifice on the "altar of alcohol," but thankfully, "no more will she darken the door of the rum shop." One did not have to look beyond the *Republican* for perpetuation of the stereotype of the drunken Irish in Omaha.⁷

Parades were not part of the festivities of Saint Patrick's Day in the late 1870s and early 1880s, abandoned apparently because of cost. In 1876 the *Republican* seemed pleased that the Emmet Monument Association decided to forego a March 17 parade and instead participate in an Omaha Fourth of July parade. The newspaper praised those Irish who had "cast their lot" with other Americans to "take pride in celebrating the Fourth of July." They were truly "America's adopted children, and shoulder to shoulder they trudge along the pathway of American progress." Although parades had disappeared, Irish and American flags and bunting decorated the public buildings on March 17, and the annual ball (at least through the 1870s) hosted by the Emmet Monument Association was well attended. In 1879 the *Omaha Evening News* notified its readers:

The Irish and St. Patrick's Day



St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church was the first church building in Omaha.
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Bishop James O'Connor. A. T. Andreas, comp., *History of Nebraska* 2 vols. (Chicago: The Western Historical Co., 1882), 1:787.

The tenth annual ball of the Emmett Monument Association will take place in Creighton Hall to-night and gives promise of being one of the most delightful affairs of the season. The programme is well arranged and numbers thirty dances. The best music in the city will be furnished.

The next day the *Republican* remarked that the ball was a "grand success," but could not help adding its repetitive comment that the organizers of the event had done well in "celebrating quietly St. Patrick's day."⁸

Morning High Mass also continued as part of the Saint Patrick's Day event in Omaha, as did an evening address. The speaker in this era was typically a cleric who traced the life of Saint Patrick and detailed the suffering of Ireland under the British. In 1880, due to the present "suffering of so many of the people in Ireland," those attending the talk by the Rev. E. A. Higgins, Superior of the Order of Jesuits in Missouri, donated \$62 to aid the "destitute" in the land of the green. Because of the somber tone regarding the situation in Ireland, there was no ball, and it would not reappear for the

next several years. The "wearin' of the green" on Saint Patrick's Day did maintain its presence as a tradition, whether it was "a bit of shamrock" or green badges for men and green ribbons for women.⁹

In the early 1880s a humorous deviation in the day's activities took place. The Ancient Order of Hibernians, organized in late 1877, paraded their band in a "handsome band wagon" through the city's streets to serenade before the residences of the president of the A.O.H. and Bishop James O'Connor and the offices of the local newspapers, including the *Republican*. The gesture did not soften the words of the newspaper. In 1882 the *Republican* told its readers that only High Mass and an evening lecture constituted the events on March 17 in the city. No parade had taken place, the *Republican* noted, and it understood the practice of holding a parade on Saint Patrick's Day was disappearing around the country, as is "the time dishonored practice of 'drowning the Shamrock.'" The *Republican* went on to declare that

"one very pleasant and noticeable feature of the day was that none of our reporters could discover a patriotic Irishman under the influence of liquor." Notice that the newspaper sent out its reporters looking for drunken Irishmen.¹⁰

For the rest of the 1880s and early 1890s Saint Patrick's Day celebrations remained unobtrusive, at least according to newspaper reports. Generally A.O.H. members marched in the morning, perhaps from their building at Thirteenth and Jackson, to St. Philomena's for High Mass. An exception occurred in 1884 when they, with fellow A.O.H. members from Council Bluffs and Dunlap, Iowa, and Plattsmouth and a Grand Army of the Republic contingent, marched throughout the business district in the rain, starting and ending, ironically, at the Masonic Hall. Although it was a rainy day, the *Daily Herald* proclaimed that "the dew on the shamrock loses none of its freshness at the celebration in Omaha." The A.O.H. also typically hosted a program, afternoon or evening, at which there were musical

presentations, recitations, and speeches. A ball in the evening became common once again, and green was everywhere—sashes hung from windows, on lapels (the proudest wearing shamrocks sent from Ireland), on horses—along with the red, white, and blue. Some of the largest celebrations in these years occurred in 1889 and 1890. In those two years there were large parades in the downtown district with the local A.O.H. joined by similar groups from South Omaha, Lincoln, Plattsmouth, and even Sioux City, Iowa, accompanied by several bands. In 1889 the *Republican*, lacking its past sarcasm, wrote that the procession

was witnessed by thousands of people, who lined the sidewalks or looked from windows upon the wearers of the green. . . . There were nearly 500 men in line, each one wearing a beautiful green sash appropriately decorated with the various insignia of the order. Floating gracefully in the free air and distributed quite liberally among the marching host were several handsome flags and banners as green and fresh looking as the slopes of Glenariff glen or the banks of Killamey.

The Omaha A.O.H. contingent in 1890 carried a new flag measuring six by eight feet (cost \$117) with the inscription "A.O.H. Division of Omaha, Nebraska, organized December 7, 1877." Following the 1890 parade the Omaha A.O.H. members, wisely or not, entertained out-of-town guests at the Exposition Hall, Fourteenth and Capitol, with cigars and beer.¹¹

The *Republican* took one of its last shots at the Irish in 1885 when it announced that Saint Patrick's Day had arrived with its green sashes and martial air in the "mamin' and its intemperance, battered plugs and soiled regalia in the even'." As expected, a letter from "An Irish-American" appeared in the *Daily Herald* the next day, calling the *Republican* piece a "most scurrilous article" and an example of bigotry that would be long remembered. The *Daily Herald* added in its description of the day's activities, somewhat ironically, that the Irish had celebrated in "a quiet

way," and the *Omaha Daily Bee* chimed in that in its assessment the day was "in every respect a great success and was a credit to the Ancient Order and the Irish people generally." The *Republican*, perhaps in the spirit of reconciliation a few years later, offered an editorial in 1888 that praised Saint Patrick for converting the Irish to Christianity, an accomplishment for which he "deserves the warm place in the human heart he has ever since held." There is no way of knowing whether the *Republican* was really suggesting indirectly how much worse the Irish would have been, in the newspaper's opinion, without Christianity.¹²

There was a virtual absence of Saint Patrick's Day activities in Omaha in 1891 and 1892 when A.O.H. members and others ventured to Lincoln and Plattsmouth to take part in celebrations in those two cities. But in 1893 Omaha once again held a large parade when the state A.O.H. convention met in the city just before Saint Patrick's Day. With business houses decorated in the typical colors, perhaps four thousand men marched four miles along the streets in slush and mud three inches deep. Most spectacular was a fairly new Irish organization in Omaha, the Hibernian Knights. Twenty-four strong, the men were dressed in dark green uniforms adorned with a "profusion" of gold braid, sabers, and helmets with waving plumes of a "rich sea green." The University of Nebraska band composed of twenty-nine members also marched, probably in "tiseled and bespangled uniforms" similar to those of other units in the parade.¹³

The only damper (other than the snow that fell on the parade participants) on what the *Omaha World-Herald* called a "glowing tribute" to Saint Patrick was an "offensive display of orange during the day." Many of those who donned the orange were members of the Order of Orangemen, and their presence reflected the hostility toward foreign-born in Omaha in the early to mid-nineties. During those years the American Protective Association

(A.P.A.), born in Iowa and organized in Omaha in 1890, ran an anti-foreigner and anti-Catholic campaign through its newspaper, the *American*. In 1892 C. P. Miller, an A.P.A. member elected mayor of South Omaha, declared in the *American* that this neighboring city would no longer be available as a "pleasant . . . pastime for drunken Roman Irish to congregate on street comers and malign Protestant Americans." And the next year, as economic depression hit the country's economy and heightened tension, the A.P.A. accused the Omaha police force, which had a large Irish contingent, of brutality when dealing with Protestants. The A.P.A. took some revenge on the Irish in the mid-nineties when the A.P.A.-dominated state legislature enacted a law creating a police board run by the A.P.A. that would have control over the Omaha fire and police commissioners. That board replaced the police commissioner with one of its own. As a result, according to the official statistics of the annual *Municipal Reports* of the city, the number of ethnic Irish individuals arrested increased from 5 percent of the total of all persons arrested in 1895 to 12 percent in 1896. Obviously, the A.P.A. presented a much greater threat than had the now defunct *Republican*. Luckily for the Irish and others, the A.P.A. lost a great deal of its power after the mid-nineties as better economic times returned.¹⁴

The Irish did swing a few verbal punches at the A.P.A. during the national convention of the A.O.H. (its fortieth), held in Omaha in May 1894. For the occasion many stores were decorated with green flags, and the *Daily Bee* bid the delegates welcome. A parade with perhaps three thousand participants and thousands of others watching led the delegates to Exposition Hall where several speakers, including Michigan Congressman Thomas Weadock (born in County Wexford, Ireland) condemned the A.P.A. Near the end of the convention the A.O.H. president delivered an address to the general public in which he echoed those com-

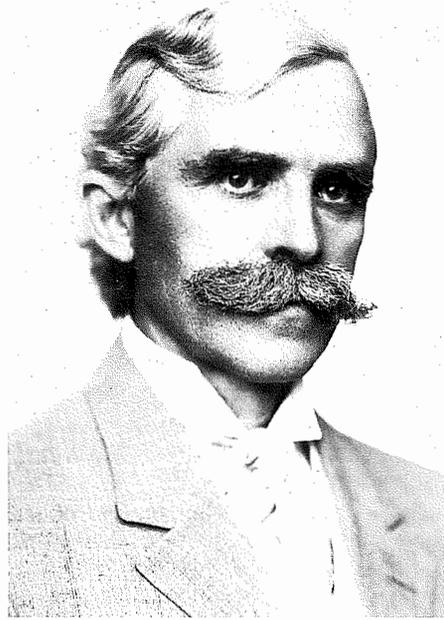
The Irish and St. Patrick's Day

ments and proclaimed that his organization must fight the A.P.A. and defend the Irish since they were good American citizens.¹⁵

Saint Patrick's Day and its observance by Irish-Americans continued to evolve in Omaha and the United States in the 1890s and early twentieth century. In Omaha, the American Protective Association's comments about "drunken Irish" aside, it is difficult to determine exactly how the Irish handled themselves on Saint Patrick's Day and other days of the year. In 1895 the *Daily Bee* remarked that since March 17 fell on Sunday that year, "much of the hilarity that commonly marks the event gave way for celebration of a more serious character." While the article focused on the main religious service, which took place at St. Patrick's Church, Fourteenth and Castellar streets, the implication is that the celebration of Saint Patrick's Day was probably not without a fair amount of rowdiness. An editorial in the late nineties following Saint Patrick's Day suggested the same when it commented on a police raid of an Omaha saloon: "The raid on the tiger seems to have shown the local knights of the green to have been a little premature in their celebration of St. Patrick's Day."¹⁶

Figures on the number of Irish who came into conflict with the law are open to debate, although the numbers seem to indicate a substantial but declining number of Irish arrested in the city in the late nineteenth century. Samples of Omaha Police Jail Registers (arrest records) for various two-week periods during several years in the late eighties and early nineties show that the arrest of individuals listed as Irish declined from 32 percent to about 12 percent of all individuals arrested. Annual arrest statistics listed in the *Omaha Municipal Reports* for five years in the 1890s give the number of Irish arrested as declining from a high of approximately 17 percent of the total number of individuals arrested in the year 1890 to 5 percent in 1895 (just before the A.P.A. took action). Only "Americans" topped

the Irish in arrests, and no other ethnic groups came close to these numbers. However, two problems make it more difficult to arrive at reliable figures. First, as individuals became naturalized citizens, they would then be listed as "American" in arrest records. This would lead to a "decline" in the number



Constantine J. Smyth served as attorney general of Nebraska from 1897 to 1901.
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of "Irish" arrested. Second, in most years the number of Irish arrested may have been influenced by the number of ethnic Irish who served as police officers. By the early nineties at least 30 to 40 percent of all Omaha patrolmen were of Irish background. Whether Irish patrolmen occasionally "helped out" Irish offenders is unanswerable. The A.P.A., of course, would have believed such an accusation. Still, the number of Irish arrested suggests two possibilities: that the Irish became involved in more than their share of trouble considering they composed between 6 and 11 percent of the city's population, or bias (perhaps based on stereotypes) helped produce more Irish arrests. Lastly, when one ex-

amines figures for those individuals arrested only on March 16 and 17 of various years, there was occasionally a spate of Irish incarcerated on those days. For example, in 1888 the Irish composed almost 60 percent of those arrested on Saint Patrick's Day, but only 7 percent three days later. A check of March 17 arrests in several following years, however, does not show a consistent pattern of a large number of Irish ending "their day" in jail.¹⁷

Whatever the real situation regarding the Irish and the celebration of Saint Patrick's Day, there was a feeling by the late 1800s that they had to be defended. In 1899 the featured speaker at St. Patrick's Church, the Rev. Jeremiah McCarthy, assistant pastor of Holy Family Church, proclaimed that the Irish were not illiterate and superstitious bigots. But he advised the children of Erin to stay in the background in politics and labor issues and never to put their name on a saloon. Father McCarthy also dubiously suggested that the Irish were not arrested as often as police records indicated. Rather, many non-Irish, he contended, would simply give an Irish name rather than reveal their true identity. In a similarly defensive vein, at an evening Saint Patrick's Day program held at the Ancient Order of Hibernians hall, C. J. Smyth, Nebraska attorney general, and others stressed their Irish heritage. The latter was a theme carried into the early 1900s. In 1901 Bishop Richard Scannell of Omaha, originally of County Cork, Ireland, told the March 17 gathering at St. Philomena's Church that English and American literature had often insulted the Irish and that they should be proud of their culture and defend it. Obviously, the leaders of the Catholic Church were taking a leading role in trying to alter the stereotype of the Irish. In the following year the Rev. D. S. Pheland of St. Louis, editor of the *Western Watchman*, spoke at the Saint Patrick's Day evening entertainment hosted by the Ancient Order of Hibernians and praised "Irish Character." He told his audience how the Irish had helped western culture

by founding churches on the continent. Even the national A.O.H., and presumably the local organization, became involved in the early years of the century by supporting a program to encourage Irish crafts, the reading of Irish literature, and the use of Gaelic.¹⁸

Another source of support for the Irish in Omaha was the church newspaper *True Voice*, founded in the early 1900s. In 1905 the *True Voice* was annoyed to learn that a “Mick’s Ball” was to be held on Saint Patrick’s Day in Madison, Nebraska. According to the newspaper this “scurrilous” event was composed of “vile caricature” and the use of imitation brogue. The *True Voice* editor declared that he thought this type of “ignorance and boorishness had long since passed away.” In short, it was an “insult” to all citizens. Likewise, a few years later the *True Voice* complained that some businesses around the country used “insulting caricatures” of the Irish in their advertisements. The editor advised readers to let business establishments know this practice offended them. With determination, they could rid American advertising of this tasteless practice just as Irish societies had helped end the “stage Irishman.” Unfortunately, the *True Voice* was not as accepting of those with whom it disagreed on other subjects as it wanted critics of the Irish to be. The newspaper castigated that “nasty George Bernard Shaw who sometimes poses as an Irishman” because he argued for the right of divorce. And when a European prince converted to Protestantism so that he could marry a divorced woman, the editor suggested that Protestants were not gaining much of a convert since he “really belongs among the Mohammedans or the Mormons.”¹⁹

In the remaining years before World War I, the *True Voice* did not have to defend the Irish as intensely as it did in the opening years of the century. The newspaper was pleased that the Irish in Pittsburgh requested that retailers not sell postcards with caricatures of the Irish since, as the *True Voice* claimed, the

cards had caused riots against the Irish in that eastern city. The newspaper did urge the Irish to behave properly, particularly on Saint Patrick’s Day. As the editor proclaimed in 1910, if the Irish love St. Patrick and the faith, “they ought to celebrate St. Patrick’s Day in a becoming manner.” And as World War I began to rage in Europe, the *True Voice* reminded the Irish that in the past many Americans had ridiculed them because



Rt. Rev. Richard Scannell, Bishop of Omaha. *Nebraskans, 1854–1904* (Omaha: The Bee Publishing Co., 1904), 18.

of their behavior on Saint Patrick’s Day. Therefore, there should be no “unbecoming celebrations.” The next year the newspaper sounded another warning not to engage in behavior that could support a caricature of the Irish. Understandably the editor stressed “no over-indulgence of intoxicants” but also added that the people should avoid Saint Patrick’s Day dances, perhaps because he was thinking of the day as one for purely religious activity. The previous year Thomas J. McCarty of Carroll, Iowa, had written to the *True Voice*, complaining that many groups held dances and other activities on Saint Patrick’s Day, at times in “places of low repute.” McCarty asked his fellow Irish

to avoid these functions and declared to all “respectable” Americans that the Irish disclaimed all responsibility for these affairs.²⁰

The Irish in America had to fight one more battle—to keep Saint Patrick’s Day as their own—and they were going to lose. By the 1890s it was evident Saint Patrick’s Day was becoming an American festivity. With the demise once again of parades, Omaha newspapers noted an ever increasing number of Saint Patrick’s Day dances sponsored primarily by non-Irish groups. Whether it was the Upholsterers and Mattress-makers Union which held its annual masquerade ball, the Bankers Union, or the Knights and Ladies of Security, many residents saw March 17 as a time for some kind of gaiety. Nor did one need to be Irish, it seemed, to wear green on Saint Patrick’s Day. The *World-Herald* noted in various years of the early 1900s that many people of different nationalities wore green neckties, carnations, ribbons, and even shamrocks. Wearing of the green may not have upset the Irish as much as did the advertisements on wire and cloth shamrocks, often for various brands of cigars, worn by many citizens of the city in 1900. Commercialization was encroaching on the day of the Irish as it was on other holidays, such as Christmas. In 1907 the Brandeis store adorned an ad with shamrocks and handed out free shamrocks at the business on March 16. Other businesses occasionally used shamrocks in their ads, and in 1915 Hardings Ice Cream suggested that Saint Patrick’s Day was a good time for ice cream. In 1917 the Thomas Kilpatrick Company announced that the Irish celebrate March 17 and “We too will have a Celebration” sale.²¹

Saint Patrick’s Day continued to be a time for the Omaha Irish to gather and celebrate their heritage. There were probably few dry eyes in the house in 1901 at the A.O.H. program when Margaret O’Toole sang “That Little Irish Shamrock” and Marie Snowden followed with “My Sweet Little Rose of

The Irish and St. Patrick's Day



Caricatures of the Irish were still popular when this postcard was published in 1906. Courtesy of author.

Killarney." The Irish also enjoyed hearing speakers sing the praises of Ireland. In 1911 Richard I. Gavin of Chicago told a packed house at the Creighton University auditorium that the Irish had accomplished great deeds everywhere and were even the first to treat women "decently," a sentiment strongly endorsed by a *Daily Bee* front-page drawing on Saint Patrick's Day 1915. Labeled "The St. Patrick's Day Flower," the illustration showed a respectable Irish gentleman (not like the Irishman of the *Harper's Weekly* cartoon of 1873) looking in an adoring manner at the petals of the shamrock (flower) of his life above him—his mother, his sister, and his sweetheart. And yet the non-Irish and even many Irish themselves increasingly viewed Saint Patrick's Day as something other than a sacred Irish holiday. On the eve of World War I the Irish Fellowship was holding an annual stag banquet (not quite what the *True Voice* editor advocated), and the Elks, Letter Carriers' Band, La Salle Club, La Mars Club, and probably a host of others felt March 17 was a perfect time for a dance. Clearly, the day of the Irish was fast becoming a day for all Americans to claim as their own.²²

Perhaps the best conclusion concerning the life of Irish-Americans in Omaha in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is that they faced some harassment but not a great deal of open hostility. Lawrence J. McCaffrey, in his work *Textures of Irish America*, has suggested that the easier acculturation of the Irish into the societies of the Midwest and Far West occurred for various reasons, and many of these seem to reflect the Omaha situation. McCaffrey argues that the Irish who ventured across the Appalachians, the Mississippi, and the Missouri were more "adventurous and energetic" and probably better off economically and educationally than the earlier "famine Irish." Also, the newer Irish coming to areas such as the Great Plains encountered a younger, more fluid society than did the "famine Irish" in the eastern cities.²³

The Irish certainly arrived early and began to mix with others in Omaha, a frontier, fluid society. In 1854, with a total male population of 177, there were 18 Irishmen, the largest foreign group represented. Soon they were joined by Irish newcomers such as James E. Boyd and Edward Creighton. Boyd fit the stereotype by working at first as a carpen-



James E. Boyd. NSHS-RG2411-536.

ter and then for the Union Pacific Railroad as a grader. Eventually he opened the second packing house in the state, and his fame and fortune enabled him to become governor of Nebraska in 1890. Creighton, probably one of Omaha's two most famous citizens of Irish descent (Father Flanagan being the other), came west as part of the expanding telegraph business and later founded the First National Bank. As the Irish population of Omaha grew in the 1860s and 1870s, the typical occupations for the Irish would be laborer and house servant. However, there were successful and influential Irish-Americans in Omaha, and there would be more. When one considers the economic success of the Irish in this developing city, never more than about 10 percent of the population, the Irish did not present a great threat to the rest of the population. Perhaps one of the best symbols of the acculturation in Omaha of the Irish and other European ethnic groups such as the Germans, Danes, and Swedes was the fact that these groups by the 1880s were spread throughout the city and not clustered in a separate neighborhood as were the Irish in Boston because of their poverty.²⁴

As we have seen, there were problems in the years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the Irish arrived in Omaha: the *Republican* reflected and raised pre-Civil War nativist feelings and post-Civil War racial and political issues; the American Protective Association of the 1890s illustrated the rise of nativist feelings once again during a time of economic tension in the country; and the *True Voice* felt there still remained a significant negative stereotype of the Irish by the turn of the century that had to be dealt with. Throughout it all, however, other Americans began to “borrow” the Irish holiday of Saint Patrick’s Day as one of their own and to become “Irish” themselves one day of the year. An event that decades earlier presented an opportunity to the Irish to say “we are somebody,” was simply a festive interlude for them and many other Americans by World War I.

Notes

¹ Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 16–20, 40; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 39; Alice F. Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), 316–46; David A. Gerber, *The Making of an American Pluralism Buffalo, New York 1825–60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 121–62; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 226–32; *Omaha City Directory*, 1866; *Omaha Daily Herald*, Feb. 1, 1867; *Omaha Weekly Herald*, Mar. 30, 1866. It is interesting to note that in 1870 17 percent of all U.S. contractors had been born in Ireland. McCaffrey, *Textures*, 25.

² *Omaha Republican*, Dec. 18, 1865, Mar. 17, 1866; *Omaha Daily Herald*, May 11, 1866, Feb. 15, 28, 1867; *Omaha Weekly Herald*, Mar. 16, May 11, 1866.

³ *Omaha Weekly Republican*, Mar. 20, 1872. The Emmet Monument Association was organized in the U.S. in 1855 with the basic purpose of invading and freeing Ireland. William D’Arcy, *The Fenian Movement In The United States 1858–1886* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 6.

⁴ *Omaha Republican*, Mar. 16, 18, 1873, Mar. 6, 1875; *Omaha Daily Herald*, Mar. 18, 1873; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 17, 1873.

⁵ *Harper’s Weekly*, 17 (Mar. 29, 1873): 252 and (April 5, 1873): 280; *Irish World*, Mar. 29, 1873; *Omaha Republican*, June 19, July 15, 16, Aug. 30, 1873.

⁶ *Omaha Republican*, July 4, Oct. 15, 22, 1873.

⁷ *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 18, 1874; *Omaha Daily Herald*, Mar. 17, 18, 1874, Mar. 18, 1875; *Omaha Republican*, Mar. 17, Dec. 6, 1874, Mar. 12, 13, 16, 18, 1875.

⁸ There could easily be confusion over the use of the term “parade.” At times a newspaper was referring only to individuals walking together along the streets to church for Mass. See *Omaha Daily Herald*, Mar. 17, 1887 (they marched to church) and *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 18, 1889 (there was a parade to the A.O.H. hall); *Omaha Republican*, Mar. 12, 18, 1876, Mar. 18, 1877, Mar. 18, 1879; *Evening News* (Omaha), Mar. 17, 1879; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 17, 1885.

⁹ *Omaha Republican*, Mar. 17, 1880, Mar. 18, 1882; *Omaha Daily Herald*, Mar. 16, 18, 1880, Mar. 18, 1881.

¹⁰ The Ancient Order of Hibernians was organized possibly in the 1600s in Ireland originally to preserve the Catholic Church and protect the priest. In the 1830s the Irish brought the institution to America where its purpose was to unite Irish Catholics “in a bond of unity, friendship and true Christian charity.” According to the *Omaha Daily Herald* of Mar. 19, 1878, the A.O.H. had been in existence in Omaha a “scarce three months.” The *Omaha World-Herald* of Mar. 17, 1890, reported that the A.O.H. carried a flag in the parade of that year inscribed “organized December 7, 1877.” See also Thomas F. McGrath, *History of the Ancient Order of Hibernians* (Cleveland, 1898), 54, 57, and John O’Dea, *History of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in America And Ladies’ Auxiliary* (National Board of the A.O.H., 1923; reprint, 1995), 884–94. *Omaha Republican*, Mar. 18, 1881, Mar. 18, 1882; *Omaha Daily Herald*, Mar. 18, 1881.

¹¹ *Omaha Daily Herald*, Mar. 16, 18, 1884, Mar. 18, 1886, Mar. 18, 1887, Mar. 18, 1888; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 15, 18, 1886, Mar. 18, 1889, Mar. 17, 18, 1890; *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 17, 18, 1889, Mar. 17, 18, 1890; *Omaha Republican*, Mar. 18, 1889.

¹² *Omaha Republican*, Mar. 17, 1885, Mar. 19, 1888; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 18, 1885; *Omaha Daily Herald*, Mar. 18, 1885.

¹³ *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 17, 1891, Mar. 17, 1892, Mar. 17, 18, 1893.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Mar. 18, 1893. Cary DeCordova Wintz, “Social Response to Ethnic Groups in Omaha, Nebraska: 1892–1910” (M.A. Thesis, Kansas State University, 1968) is a good survey of the A.P.A. See specifically pp. 55–57. Martin E. Carlson, “A History of the American Protective Association in Nebraska” (M.A. thesis, Colorado State College of

Education, 1947), 52–53. *Omaha Municipal Reports*, 1895, 1896, W. Dale Clark Library, Omaha.

¹⁵ *Omaha Daily Bee*, May 8, 9, 10, 12, 1894.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Mar. 18, 1895, Mar. 18, 1898.

¹⁷ I selected the samples randomly from the Jail Registers: June 22–July 7, 1888; May 1–14, 1889; July 1–14, 1891; April 15–30, 1892; and September 11–24, 1893. *Omaha Police Jail Registers*, Nebraska State Historical Society, Film RG313. *Omaha Municipal Reports*, 1889, 1890, 1891, 1895, 1896. The figure of a 6–7 percent Irish population comes from Howard Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans: Residential and Social Mobility in Omaha, 1880–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 13, and the higher figure is from Kathleen Louise Fimple, “Midwestern Mosaic: A Study of the Homogeneity of Ethnic Populations in Omaha, Nebraska, 1880” (M.A. Thesis, South Dakota State University, 1978), 7, 23.

¹⁸ *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 18, 1899, Mar. 18, 1902; *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 17, 18, 1899, Mar. 18, 1901, Mar. 16, 1905.

¹⁹ *True Voice*, Mar. 17, 1905, May 8, 1908, Mar. 5, 1909, Mar. 10, 1911. The Madison, Nebraska, newspaper reported only that a “masque ball” held March 17 was not as “largely attended” as the previous year. *Madison Chronicle*, Mar. 24, 1905. Concerning the American stage prior to the Civil War “Paddy” and “Biddey” were: “ignorant, lazy, unreliable, emotionally unstable, hard drinking, often violent, improvident buffoons.” A negative image, although less harsh, continued throughout the 1800s. In the early twentieth century the American cinema (up to 1910) pictured the Irish as “good to laugh at, bad to trust.” McCaffrey, *Textures*, 28.

²⁰ *True Voice*, Mar. 12, 1909, Mar. 11, 1910, Mar. 12, 19, 1915, Mar. 17, 1916.

²¹ *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 18, 1900, Mar. 16, 1907; *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 17, 1896, Mar. 17, 1897, Mar. 17, 1900, Mar. 18, 1905, Mar. 17, 1910, Mar. 17, 1915, Mar. 17, 1916, Mar. 17, 1917. On the commercialization of Christmas in Omaha see Tommy R. Thompson, “Sales, Santa, and Good Fellows: Celebrating Christmas in Omaha,” *Nebraska History* 68 (Fall, 1987):127–41.

²² *Omaha Daily Bee*, Mar. 17, 1915; *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 18, 1901, Mar. 18, 1911, Mar. 17, 1915, Mar. 17, 1916.

²³ McCaffrey, *Textures*, 23–24, 31.

²⁴ *Sun Newspapers* (Omaha), July 12, 1979; *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 19, 1961, 1B–2B; McCaffrey, *Textures*, 40; Fimple, “Midwestern Mosaic,” 44; Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans*, 13.