

The Milwaukee Irish

Early history in Milwaukee

While some Irish had been in the United States prior to the American Revolution, a large wave of Irish immigrants arrived during and shortly after the Irish Potato Famine of 1845 to 1852.

Many of those who came to Milwaukee took jobs in the Third Ward. At the time of their arrival the Ward was mostly swamp land with some Yankee and German commercial buildings located on the Lake Michigan coast. The merchants needed the swamp cleared and infrastructure built. With one wagon full of dirt at a time, the Irish filled in the area and constructed roads. They built cottages between the Milwaukee River and the lake—cottages so small and so close together that residents could literally stretch out their hands from their windows and touch the houses next door.

Many of the Irish had family members who settled in Chicago and the Third Ward Irish would take steamers down Lake Michigan to visit their relatives. Then tragedy struck. In 1860 the steamship *The Lady Elgin* sank off the coast of Chicago on the return trip and 300 Irish died. This was the second greatest shipwreck ever on the Great Lakes.

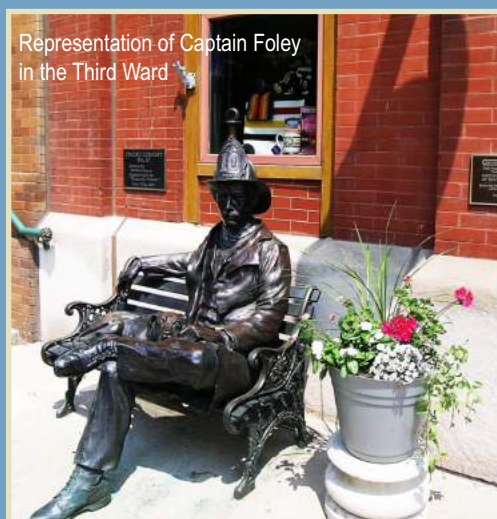
But this was not the end of the Irish tragedies in the Third Ward. In 1892 the Ward burned to the ground. It was Milwaukee's worst fire ever, and had a lot to do with congested streets and alleyways. Commerce was so consolidated in the Ward that by 1890 the businesses, industries and railroad yards were stacking their lumber, coal, and oil drums wherever there was room. The Irish fire chief of the time, James Foley, made the argument that firefighting equipment could not pass blocked backroads, alleys, and entrances to docks to fight any fires that might occur.

"My family was literally starving [because of the potato famine]. The family that came here—my ancestors—had already lost three kids by the time they got on the boat and lost two more on the journey here. Then on the boat trip to Milwaukee, if you got seriously sick on the boat, they took you to this pest house on Jones Island [a peninsula off the eastern coast of Milwaukee] and locked you in there to die before the boat got to Milwaukee."

"When we started to come over in big numbers, especially after the famine, we were considered anathema. They said we were a different race of people and you'd see these signs put up by employers, 'No Irish Need Apply.' People said we were dirty and dangerous."

"[They said] we kept pigs in our bedrooms. We were part of a conspiracy to make the Pope king of the world."

Quotes of Irish informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.



Foley brought this issue to the Common Council but nothing was done to relieve the congested areas. Foley then argued in support of a fire boat to fight potential fires from the river shores. The fireboat *Cataract* was built and was stationed in the Milwaukee River. All of these factors played roles in the Third Ward Fire of 1892.

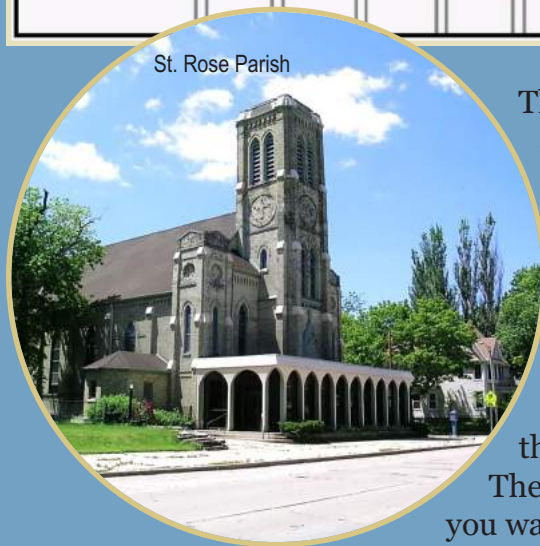
Virtually all the homes were destroyed in this fire. The Irish had to move on. Fortunately, some of the Irish found a new neighborhood in a newly developing project on Milwaukee's west side—Merrill Park.

A literal walk through Milwaukee's Irish history

While nothing but markers exist to acknowledge the Irish presence in the Third Ward, this is surely not the case in Merrill Park. Here you will see much of the built environment of the four P's of Irish life—parish, pub, politics, and performance. We will begin our walk at the corner of North Thirtieth Street and Michigan.

You are on the block of St. Rose *Parish* (the first P of Irish life). (The Irish called this church “St. Rose’s.”) In its heyday—between the 1930s and

1960s—the parish had seven Sunday services at 5:30, 6:30, 7:30, 9:00, 10:00, 11:00, and noon. The last four services were often standing room only. But St. Rose’s wasn’t just a place to worship. It was also the community center for the Merrill Park Irish.



St. Rose Parish

The doors of St. Rose were open 24 hours a day, and activities ranged from Catholic rites, to social clubs, to classes on living skills, to family counseling, to youth recreation, to neighborhood planning.

Let's walk south on Thirtieth Street. Here we will pass the St. Rose school, which is today consolidated as the St. Rose and St. Leo Catholic School.

The original school was founded in 1893. As you walk, look on the east side of the street.

This area was once lined with *pubs* (another P of Irish life). The developer of Merrill Park, Sherburn S. Merrill, banned taverns in

“‘The Ancient Order of Hibernians was organized to protect Irish Catholics even before the famine. This was during the days of ‘no Irish, no Catholics need apply.’ We protected the priests and the churches. Today we have various functions and fortunately don't need to spend much time protecting our Irish American citizens.”

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his development (with a western boundary that ended on the east side of Thirtieth Street), hence the Irish inhabitants and others built pubs just across the street. The same was true on the eastern border of Merrill's development, at North Twenty-Seventh Street.

If *parish* life was the model for community ideals among the Merrill Park Irish, *pub* life was the guide to social relationships. Pub life was an import from rural Ireland, with a few new twists. In Ireland, English limits on industrialization and restrictions on the kinds of crops Irish farmers could raise helped create a society in which marriage of the offspring was delayed to provide manual labor for the farm, and support for the parents. Without spouses and children of their own, young people had little to do after dark. Many found the local pub a place to relieve loneliness.

But in America, marriages were not necessarily delayed. The pub remained a strong focal point for socializing among many urban Irish, but only occasionally after dark. In Merrill Park, the pubs were often stopping-off points for men and women on their way home from work.

In a moment we will turn west on West Clybourn Street and enter the area called "political row," but first, we'll continue south to St. Paul Avenue and get a

glimpse of Merrill Park's past *performance* life (another P of Irish life). Look across the street. See the lot with all the crops growing? That was once the site of the Irish Village Pub where drinking and story-telling were the activities of the night.

But there's a performance site even more compelling on this block. On the corner of St. Paul Avenue and Thirtieth Street (3001 West St. Paul Avenue), there is a house that once belonged to the Irish Tracy family. Young Spencer Tracy grew up there. He was an altar boy at St. Rose's before moving on into a phenomenal career in acting, including two Academy Awards and nine nominations (see more below).



Spencer Tracy house

"The unions were very powerful and we hung out in certain bars. We used to decide everything in the bar— who would get this job and that job, who would run for this or that office, how we would get people jobs at the county."

"Irish stories can go on for days. We have this event close to Halloween, called Samhain, where we all go out to the woods, gather around a campfire, and listen to Irish stories, some of them very mystical."

"I learned Gaelic because my Irish ancestors originally spoke it. Not many Irish immigrants spoke Gaelic, but mine did. It was important to me to learn it."

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Spencer Tracy

Spencer Bonaventure Tracy was born in the Merrill Park neighborhood in 1900. His family, consisting of father John, mother Carrie (nee Brown), and older brother Carroll, lived at 3003 West St. Paul Avenue. Like many residents of Merrill Park, the Tracys were descendants of Irish immigrants, and they worshipped at St. Rose Parish. Spencer became an altar boy.

By the time that Spencer was 10 years old, the family had moved to Kenesaw Street (today's Woodward Street) in Bay View.

Later they moved again—this time to Woodland Court in Today's Story Hill neighborhood. However, the family continued to worship at St. Rose's.

By 1930, Spencer Tracy was married to Louise Treadwell and working as an actor in New York City where he spent seven years in the theatre. He and his family—which now included two children—eventually moved to California where Tracy made 25 films. Nominated for an Oscar for Best Actor nine times over his career, he won twice—once for Captains

Courageous and once for Boys Town.

Tracy separated from Louise in 1933 and, by the 1940s, took up a long-term relationship with Katherine Hepburn.



Let's return to Clybourn Street and move west. You may notice that the homes in Merrill Park are very large and often ornate. While the Irish coming from the Third Ward were generally poor and many took entry level jobs at the railroad yards just a few blocks south of where you now stand, many also worked their way up the economic ladder—often through jobs and offices in the public sector.

We are now in the area known as political row. *Politics* (another P of Irish life) was a very successful activity in Merrill Park. In fact, when researchers from Urban Anthropology Inc. conducted an oral history of the neighborhood, they learned that in one half century alone in the 1900s, Merrill Park produced nearly 100 judges, district attorneys, and state, county, and city legislators and municipal department heads. During this period, three of four county executives were Merrill Parkers. And three of four Milwaukee mayors were raised in the neighborhood.

The area labeled “political row” extends to North Thirty-Third Street. While not even half of the residents of Merrill Park were Irish, the Irish influence was everywhere. Even some non-Irish took an interest in politics. Turn north on Thirty-Third Street and stop at 504 North Thirty-Third Street. This was the childhood home of Carl and Frank Zeidler, two past mayors of Milwaukee.

“Those of us that first settled in the East pretty much built the eastern section of the transcontinental railroad. It was dangerous work, and barely no one else wanted it. We continued working for the railroad as we moved west, and we really did this in, where the railroad shops hired some two thousand people, or perhaps more.”

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Continue walking to Michigan and turn east. You will pass Marquette High School, which was founded in 1925. Many of the Irish young people graduated from this school. As you are heading east on your way back to the starting point of the tour, turn right on Thirty- Second Street on the east side of the street and stop at 546 North Thirty-Second Street. This is the home of William O'Donnell, a former Milwaukee County Executive who served in that office from 1977 to 1988. He lived in this house most of his life and did not have a driver's license until his sixties. He took the bus everywhere and even took neighborhood kids to the lakefront by bus in his younger days.

Now return to your starting point. On the way you might wonder why so few Irish live in Merrill Park today. One reason was I 94. The building of this freeway removed about one-third of the Merrill Park neighborhood, making it necessary for many Irish (and others) to seek housing in other communities. Another reason for the exodus was the consolidation of many hospitals under the county direction of Executive John Doyne in the late 1970s. Many Irish had been employed at hospitals just blocks from Merrill Park, including Doctor's, Children's Samaritan, and Deaconess Hospitals. When these were consolidated at the County Grounds in Wauwatosa, many Irish followed their jobs and moved to that suburb.

Recent history

Surprisingly, the moves out of Merrill Park did not end cultural life for the urban Irish. The parishes and pubs still brought the community back. Merrill Parkers continue to gather at least once a year at St. Rose Parish or in Irish pubs to talk about old times, and political life is still the talk of the day.

The Irish also gather at the Irish Cultural and Heritage Center at 2133 West Wisconsin Avenue or at Irish Fest on the Summerfest grounds in August. But the main venue to experience everything Irish is at the annual St. Patrick's Day Parade in March of every year, usually held on Plankinton Avenue and Old World Third Street between Wisconsin and Juneau Avenues. Here you will see marching bands, pipers, Irish dancers, floats, and Irish celebrities. There are parties throughout the day and night with food, entertainment, and beverages. To learn the exact date and location, go to <http://saintpatricksparade.org/>.



the home of William O'Donnell

"Because we had so many people in office, a lot of people in Merrill Park relied on public jobs. The news would get passed around on jobs and contracts and what vending lists to get on."

"The Irish really voted, and often as a block. Politicians would have to cater to us to get our vote. We also had the highest number of people in office."

"Children were involved with politics. My father would get us involved. He'd pick a candidate and give us a reason for wanting this candidate to win the election. We'd work for the candidate, handing out literature, whatever was needed."

"Historically, the Irish have been stronger in politics than any other group. Even today, when you look at who runs for office or who heads political departments, you will see a lot of Irish names. Traditionally the taverns were where we'd meet to discuss politics and decide who would run for what office. But places like the [name of organization] also keep close tabs on what's going on in Ireland, and some of us play advocacy roles."

"The freeway broke our neighborhood in two. It took out so much housing, some of it very nice housing. Some Irish had to move away. People were convinced this would be a good thing, that people could get on that freeway and go anywhere. The truth is that now we just have people driving through our neighborhood to get on or off the freeway. They don't stop and use our businesses."

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St. Patrick's Day Parade



"One of our events is the annual spaghetti dinner—not exactly an Irish entree, but, hey, it's easy to make for large crowds, which we get. It's held in the old neighborhood at [name of church]. It usually starts out with a mass. Then all come for the food. You never know what you're going to get. There used to be a cook, [name], whose specialty was brown spaghetti. No one knew if they should actually take the chance and eat the stuff."

"The Irish have left the old neighborhoods. They dispersed and continue to disperse. But we haven't lost our pride in ethnicity. We still have family. We have dancing and pubs and restaurants and festivals. We have Irish Fest and St. Patrick's Day and we still get together for that."

"We have one of the few parades left in the city—our annual St. Patrick's Day Parade. We also have bands and dancers and our Shamrock Pipers that lead processions for all kinds of events. The Scots and Scots Irish participate and some others too."

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Meet one of your current Irish neighbors

Marty Horning (Delany-Dooley-Flynn)

Marty Horning is an excellent representative of at least three of the four P's of Irish life (parish, pub, politics, and performance). When asked what he does routinely that is characteristic of his Irish half, he replied: "Talk bullshit and drink Irish whiskey while listening to Irish music."

A professional educator with an M.S. Ed. from UW-Milwaukee, Horning has taught urban youth for over 40 years. In the process he helped kids build over 40 real wooden boats.

Horning has been a lifelong political activist, fighting for progressive political change, including desegregation of Milwaukee schools. In the photo to the right he is seen being restrained by Milwaukee police in Humboldt Park in the 1970s when he protested an anti-bussing demonstration by a neo Nazi group.

While Horning is a fan of reading, travel, music, film, camping, and fishing, attention to his Irish heritage dominates much of his leisure time. A member of the ICHC (Irish Cultural & Heritage Center), he studies Irish history, routinely celebrates St. Patrick's Day and the Easter Rising, and has traveled to Ireland. "I've visited the graves of the martyrs in Glasnevin Cemetery and did a pilgrimage to Beal na Blath to the site where Michael Collins was killed," he declared. "I've also seen James Joyce's death mask!"

When asked about the accomplishments he is most proud of, Marty Horning cites "raising two strong, aware children." Their names are Isabella Jazmin and Juliana Maria.

