

LIFESTYLE

Pride on Parade

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It seemed like a great idea at the time. It was the late 1980s, and Newport was hosting the St. Patrick's Day parade, as it had every year since 1957. One of the sponsors brought along a half-dozen miniature Clydesdale horses. Prancing proudly in the middle of the parade, the diminutive equines did indeed charm the spectators — if not the marchers who followed. “The people who came after had to tiptoe the rest of the route,” says James Mahoney, Grand Marshal of the 2008 parade. Lesson learned. “After that year, all equestrian mounts were placed at the end,” he says with a chuckle.

Road apples notwithstanding, not much has fazed the organizers, the participants, or the tens of thousands of people who turn out annually to celebrate Newport's vibrant Irish community. They are the parade equivalent of the U.S. Postal Service, laughing in the face of rain, sleet and especially snow. When a wintry forecast in 1990 led Boston and New York to cancel their parades, Newport's went on as scheduled. Light flurries swirled as the marchers stepped off from City Hall, led by the Rhode Island Highlanders, the only bagpipe band that dared to brave the weather. By parade's end, marchers and spectators wore a blanket of snow. As a reward for their intrepidity, the Highlanders have led the parade every year since.

COVID-19, however, proved too formidable a challenge to overcome. In 2020 the city was forced to cancel the parade for the very first time. March will probably come and go without it this year, too, but parade committee chairman Dennis Sullivan is optimistic about an autumn version instead. The committee has asked the City Council to approve having it on September 25, and while no final decision had been made at press time, Sullivan and his fellow organizers are holding out hope.

More: No marching this March: September date pitched for annual Newport St. Patrick's Day Parade

Bill and Karen Cardinal feel the absence of the parade both as avid participants and as businesspeople. The owners of the Cardinal Restaurant Group, which includes the Middletown IHOP, the couple have been the parade's largest sponsor since 2001 and shared Grand Marshal duties in 2016.

"We get through a Northeast winter, and St. Patrick's Day is the benchmark that so many look forward to," Bill says. "It tells us we've survived another winter."

Neither of them blames the City Council for its decision. "In the long term," says Karen, "it's what we have to do to ensure there's a parade in six months or next year. Everyone's health comes first. We'll have to put off the celebration with friends a little longer, but it'll be celebrated in the meantime in our homes and in our hearts."

The men who organized the very first Newport St. Patrick's Day Parade, back in 1842, would surely be surprised at how the event has grown. That first effort was a decidedly more solemn affair — a religious procession, more than a parade — sponsored as it was by the Newport Catholic Temperance Society. As the Catholic newspaper *The Boston Pilot* reported, the group celebrated Mass at St. Joseph's Church at the corner of Barney and Mount Vernon streets (where the church was then located). Following the service, which included "an eloquent panegyric by the Reverend Mr. O'Reilly upon the Patron Saint of Ireland," the group held a procession that started and ended in the churchyard. Dinner followed at the Masonic Hall, the newspaper relates, with a dozen or more toasts (presumably with a nonalcoholic beverage) offered to St. Patrick, Ireland, the United States, its President and Vice President, and any number of saints and martyrs.

Steve Marino, a retired history teacher and member of the board of the Museum of Newport Irish History, calls the original parade an extraordinary event. Newport in the 1820s had seen a big influx of Irish immigrants, many of whom came to build Fort Adams, he says. By the 1840s, those jobs had largely disappeared and the Irish community was dwindling. "People did find jobs in mills and in hotels, as the tourism industry was beginning to grow," he says, "but it was a difficult time economically for them." He sees the first parade as a statement of sorts. "They're in a thick of trouble, but they are a vibrant, politically active community, and they want to make themselves seen and heard."

For the next century or so, the parade was a sporadic event, held some years in Newport, others in Providence, and often not at all. In 1957, a group of friends got together and decided it was time to make it an annual event.

Dan Titus remembers hanging out with his buddies in the 1970s and '80s as the parade wended its way past their houses in the Fifth Ward. "There was a group of us who grew up together in the neighborhood: John Fletcher, my brother Joe, and Dennis Sullivan. We thought we were the coolest."

Today, the friends get together to devote their time, talent and energy to the parade. Sullivan took over as chairman of the organizing committee back in the late 1990s (he admits he can't quite recall the year), and the Titus brothers and Fletcher are longtime committee members.

In the decades since Sullivan became chairman, the parade has continued to grow. "When I was a kid, you'd have a bagpipe group and some John Deere tractors," he jokes. Now there might be up to 100 different groups, from bagpipe bands to high school marching bands to dance troupes to clown acts to Revolutionary War reenactors, as well as local businesses and police and fire departments from the county and beyond.

The mile-and-a-quarter route begins at City Hall on Broadway and winds its way down America's Cup Avenue and Thames Street, ending at St. Augustin's Church at the corner of Eastnor Road and Carroll Avenue.

The committee has added to the parade's appeal by turning the whole day into a family-friendly event. For a dozen years now, many of the acts marching in the parade have stuck around and entertained families at the Martin Recreation Center, aka The Hut. Titus is hopeful that those extra festivities will return when the parade does. "We all remember the parade so fondly from when we were kids, and we want the next generation to have the same good memories," he says.

Those who've had the honor of acting as Grand Marshal never quite forget it, whether they march in sun, rain or snow. The Cardinals were lucky as co-Grand Marshals in 2016. "We had a beautiful day," Bill recalls. "It was at least 60 degrees." Not so lucky was the previous year's Grand Marshal, Brian Arnold, owner of both B.R. Arnold Construction and Cappy's Hillside Cafe. "It was a deluge for him," Bill Cardinal says. "At the end I said to him, 'Oh Brian, I'm so sorry it rained on your parade.'" He said, "I didn't notice, Bill."

Asked to share his recollections, Arnold admits the weather didn't dampen his enthusiasm. "It is one of Newport's true honors, absolutely. All that rain was, as I saw it, tears of joy."

Kiki Finn had been an active member of the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians, as well as an enthusiastic volunteer for the parade for years, when she got the call asking her to be Grand Marshal in 2009. "I thought at first, this is some kind of joke," she recalls. Finn, who

still lives in the Eastnor Road house she grew up in, says, “For our little community, the parade was like old home week, like Christmas or Thanksgiving. People threw house parties and got together and visited. It was a festive, fun time.”

Like Bill and Karen Cardinal, Finn worries about the impact the loss of the parade will have on the city. “Economically, it’s always a helpful event for the city. Not having it is definitely adding to the difficulty for restaurants and other businesses,” she says. Still, she keeps the faith that the parade — and the neighborhood festivities — will return in the not-too-distant future. “Everyone loves a parade, after all. That love isn’t going to go away just because of a couple of years of its absence.”

When the parade returns, so will the old customs, like the pre-parade Mass, the presentation of the traditional blackthorn shillelagh to the Grand Marshal, and the post-parade toast at the Hibernian Hall.

There will be new customs, too, including one that honors the mother of a parade organizer. John Fletcher, of that merry band of Fifth Ward friends who now run the parade they so loved as kids, speaks lovingly of his mother, Sabina Fletcher, nee Tucci. Mrs. Fletcher may have been Italian and a native of Boston, but she moved to the Fifth Ward while she was still young. “Most of her friends were Irish,” her son says, “so she didn’t have much of a choice but to join the party.”

More: What the Newport St. Patrick's Day Parade committee's letter reveals about 2021 plans

Mrs. Fletcher never missed the parade, even as she aged and needed help to get around. Unfortunately, no matter where she placed her motorized scooter, and later her wheelchair, people would stand in front of her, blocking the view.

When she passed away in 2019 at 100 years old, her family asked for donations to the parade committee. The money raised was used to buy barricades that are painted in the red, white and green of the Italian flag. One side says “In Memory of Sabina Fletcher” in English; the other side says the same in Italian. The barriers will delineate a handicapped viewing area at the parade route’s end, right near the reviewing stand. “She was Italian,” her son says, “but we’re all Irish on St. Patrick’s Day.”

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