

Echo St. Patrick's Day

The enduring Irishness of Buffalo's First Ward

By Timothy Bohan
letters@irishecho.com

During the 1840s and '50s, numerous Irish-American enclaves in North America arose as a result of the Great Famine in Ireland. Some of these Irish settlements are well known such as the Bowery and Five Points in New York City, Canaryville and Bridgeport in Chicago, and Southie in both Boston and South Philadelphia. But one of the longest enduring and most historically significant is a community called the First Ward, located in Buffalo, New York.

The First Ward was a political entity along the banks of Buffalo's bustling waterfront. A small group of Irish settled in this marshy land after working on the construction of the Erie Canal in 1825, and by 1841 there was a large enough Irish neighborhood to form St. Patrick's Parish just north of the First Ward.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, many middle-class Irish would migrate from the Ward to a neighborhood called South Buffalo - the home of the late NBC host Tim Russert and Chicago Blackhawk's hockey star Patrick Kane.

But a sizable Irish contingent remained in the Ward for generations.

Many Irish came to Buffalo to work in the burgeoning grain transshipment industry after Joseph Dart invented the world's first steam-powered grain elevator in 1842. By 1850, the Irish dominated the political leadership of the First Ward, and were able to take charge of their destiny.

Professor William Jenkins from York University in Toronto claims that the First Ward is one of the longest enduring blue-collar Irish neighborhoods in North America. There are two reasons for this durability. First, the Irish controlled an entire political ward and were thus able to exchange their votes for an outsized proportion of civil servant and government jobs.

Over time this enabled many residents to move into the middle class, so the benefits of remaining in this community were high. Second, the Irish in this neighborhood were physically cut off from their fellow Buffalonians. Railroad tracks, canals, towering grain elevators, the Buffalo River, and Lake Erie were the barriers that kept them isolated in place and spirit.

The Ward's physical isolation was one of the major reasons it endured while other communities in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia integrated more quickly with non-Irish residents.

The First Ward's contribution to the history of Buffalo, New York and our nation is noteworthy. In politics and government, First Warders made significant contributions. The most famous



Author Timothy Bohan.

was General William "Wild Bill" Donovan.

Donovan, raised in the Ward, led the 1st Battalion of the famed 69th Irish brigade in World War I and later became its regimental commander. In 1919, Colonel "Wild Bill" earned a hero's welcome in New York City upon returning from his victories on the battlefields in France and became one of America's most decorated soldiers. He is the only soldier to have earned the Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, and the National Security Medal.

In the early 1940s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt tapped Donovan to create the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the CIA, and he is known as the "Father of American Intelligence."

Other prominent First Ward politicians include John C. Sheehan and his brother William "Blue-Eyed Billy" Sheehan. John, the comptroller for the city of Buffalo, left his hometown for New York City after he was caught embezzling city funds.

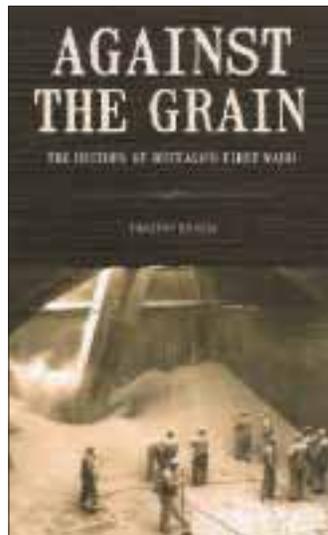
After arriving in New York, he worked for Tammany Hall and eventually became Police Commissioner of New York City. Later, John grabbed the all-powerful title of Tammany Hall boss after Richard Crocker stepped aside. John's younger brother "Blue-Eyed Billy" was the Speaker of the New York State Assembly, New York's youngest lieutenant governor, and in 1904 an influence in U.S. presidential politics when he maneuvered to get his friend Alton B. Parker picked as the

Democratic nominee to run against Teddy Roosevelt.

Sheehan was also the choice to be a U.S. senator from New York in 1911 until a young New York state legislator named Franklin Delano Roosevelt stopped his inevitable nomination. Despite the setback, Billy Sheehan went on to use his political connections to become a millionaire lawyer in New York City.

Former First Ward cabin boy William "Fingy" Conners wrestled control of the waterfront transshipment business in Buffalo from other players. Later, he became the largest private employer on the Great Lakes when he became chairman of the Great Lakes Transit Corporation. As one of Buffalo's wealthiest men, Conners was active in local and state Democratic politics.

In 1906, Conners was elected chairman of the Democratic State Committee of New York.



Conners owned two Buffalo newspapers, a brewery, a land development company in Florida, and countless other business ventures. Later in the 20th century, another Warder Peter Crotty controlled Buffalo's Democratic Party, and was recognized as the unofficial boss of the New York State Democratic Party during the John F. Kennedy presidency.

In fact, Ted Kennedy recognized this Irishman from the south side of Buffalo for being the first Democratic leader in the nation to support JFK's political candidacy and for swinging the New York State delegation to him in 1960.

First Warders also played a crucial role in the Irish Independence movement.

At the end of May 1866, the Ward housed many of the 800 Fenian soldiers and their weapons before the famous Fenian Raid into Canada-an effort to hold Canada hostage in exchange for Ireland's freedom from English rule. First Ward men also led and staffed one of the largest regiments in the raid. While this expedition into Canada was ultimately a failure in its primary goal, it was a significant event in the history of Irish independence.

First Warders such as John Hynes and William "Blue-Eyed Billy" Sheehan were also leaders of the American branch of the Land League and later the Irish National League.

First Warders were generous with fundraising when Irish leaders such as Thomas Meagher, Michael Davitt, Charles Stewart Parnell, and Eamon de Valera visited Buffalo. In fact, in 1880, Charles Parnell said his visit to Buffalo with John Dillon was his most financially successful trip compared to previous stops in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. The contributions from the First Ward and Buffalo toward the Irish cause of independence led Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams to come to Buffalo in 2008 to thank them for their efforts.

First Ward Irish also made important contributions to U.S. labor history. Thomas Ventry O'Connor was president of the International Longshoremen's Association and the chairman of the U.S. Shipping Board. T. V. O'Connor was also the assistant secretary of labor under President Warren Harding. The Irish from the Ward were in the middle of the 1877 and 1892 railroad strikes as several local men gave their lives in these deadly strikes to contest wage cuts.

In 1899, it was Irish grain scoopers from the Ward who went on strike because of cuts to their own wages. Aside from shutting down Great Lakes' shipping for several weeks, this strike was a significant event in labor because it was one of the first interventions by

the Catholic Church hierarchy on behalf of the strikers.

The Buffalo bishop, James Quigley, former pastor of the First Ward's St. Bridget's Church, rallied the workers to a successful resolution of the strike. Quigley's reward was to be named the Archbishop of Chicago a few years later. In the realm of leisure and sports, First Warders also contributed much to the nation's history. Probably the greatest First Ward athlete was Jimmy Slattery, the World Light Heavyweight Champion in 1927. Slats regularly fought to sold-out crowds at Madison Square Garden and Yankee Stadium. William Aman won the single scull World Champion Single Scull contest in New York City in 1907, and Edward "Algie" McGuire was the National Single Scull champion in 1923 when he beat Philadelphia's three-time Olympic gold medal winner, Paul Costello.

Michael Shea, a former ironworker, became the biggest theater operator in Buffalo, and is recognized on both sides of the Atlantic as a key person in improving the reputation of vaudeville. Another Warder, Jack O'Brian, was a columnist for the Associated Press in New York City and his columns on theater, movies and radio reviews ran in 1,400 newspapers, including, for some years, the Irish Echo. There are several references to O'Brian in George Clooney's 2005 film "Good Night, and Good Luck."

While Irish immigration to the First Ward slowed significantly in the 1930s, the First Ward is still recognized as the Irish neighborhood of Buffalo. There are Irish families who can trace their roots back for five or six generations in the Ward.

The First Ward has remained a blue-collar Irish neighborhood for its entire history, unlike Irish neighborhoods such as Southie, which has recently gentrified and lost many of its original Irish families.

While Irish enclaves like Canaryville, the Bowery Five Points, and Bridgeport long ago lost their Irish homogeneity, the First Ward continues to hold to its Irish heritage and solidarity.

For over 170 years, First Ward Irish have made a substantial contribution to their city and their nation. Some Warders would claim that compared to New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, or Chicago, Buffalo's First Ward is the most Irish neighborhood in the United States. They may be right.

Timothy Bohan recently published "Against the Grain: The History of Buffalo's First Ward," which is available at barnesandnoble.com. Additional information at www.oldfirstward.com. Bohan's family (the Bohan's, Driscolls, Coughlins, Roches and Brinkworths) lived in the First Ward from 1849-1949.