



# Dec. 2004

## The Unique Irish Christmas

by Brian Witt

“The wren, the wren, the king of birds”. When these words ring out, one will know its Stephen’s Day, the day after Christmas, and a time of celebration will again be firmly upon Ireland. In a country of contradictions, many of the season’s customs will be a combination of the ancient and the modern, the Druidic and the Christian — melded, blended, and, although many would be horrified to say, celebrated in the mode of an ancient religion most Irish just take for granted.

The celebration of Christmas in December is an obvious example of customs blended. Early Christians hid their birthday fetes of Christ within the time frame of Roman Saturnalia, the birth of the Sun god. Being adaptive, these folks empowered their new celebration by telling others Christ brought new light into the world. Also, December’s winter solstice was celebrated by the Celts, and with the introduction of Christianity to the island, it too was appropriated by the Irish. If one goes to Ireland during the month of December, they can see long lines of people waiting to enter Newgrange, an ancient building designed to allow the sun to shine into its interior on the five days from the 21 to the 25.

### HOLLY

The use of holly dates back to the time of the Druids, who set out holly as a kind gesture to tiny fairies who might use it as a hiding place. As an evergreen, it was also valued as a way to keep the earth beautiful after deciduous trees had lost their leaves and color. When Christianity reached Ireland, the Christians continued to decorate their homes with holly at the

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time of the winter solstice. In time the green plant became a Christmas tradition and the red berries came to symbolize Christ's blood.

### **THE USE OF MISTLETOE**

Mistletoe was long in disfavor in Christian circles. The ancient Celts believed that mistletoe had special healing powers. Its perceived power was so great that at times its presence would even encourage a brief truce among enemies. However, for Christians the mistletoe's powerful reputation was dismissed as too paganistic, and it was banned until the English Victorian era when the custom of kissing under the mistletoe was revived.

### **THE CANDLE IN THE WINDOW**

The placing of a lighted candle in the window of a house on Christmas Eve is still in use in the 21st century. Symbolic of welcoming the traveling Mary and Joseph prior to the birth of Jesus, it also indicated a safe place for priests to perform mass during Penal Times, as it was illegal for priests to be sheltered.

### **CLEANING THE HOUSE**

The custom of cleaning the house from top to bottom was as much a function of need as custom. The holidays, a time of entertaining family, also became the time to clean the house for the Lord. The older practice of whitewashing houses has passed in recent times.

### **THE LADEN TABLE**

The Laden Table was a combination of the old Laws of Brehon, the code of life in Gaelic Ireland where food and lodging had to be provided for travelers who might happen by, and the story of the birth of Christ. After evening meal on Christmas eve the kitchen table was again set and on it placed a loaf of bread filled with caraway seeds and raisins, a pitcher of milk and a large lit candle. The door to the house was left unlocked so that Mary and Joseph, or any wandering wayfarer might find hospitality within.

### **THE WREN BOY PROCESSION**

The Wren Boys were a Munster tradition. The killing of a wren, or using a substitute in an empty coffin, and then going to beg for food, alcohol or other treats on St. Stephen's Day, December 26, hearkened to the pre-Christian era. The wren was known as the Druid's bird, and was also noted as having betrayed St. Stephen in the furze when the Roman soldiers were searching for him. It was seen in early times as being a

sign of killing off the ancient practices, in honor of the birth of Christ, with the execution of the bird. The Wren Boys would wander house to house, in disguise, singing songs, occasionally acting out entire segments of the set piece.

So, as the modern Irish go to dress up a tree, (old Germanic tradition), they will happily celebrate the season and the day. And as they say in Irish, Nollaig Shona Duit — Happy Christmas.

May the season be blessed for you and your families.

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## Dane County

The November meeting was held on November 9, 2004, at the Coliseum Bar. Our main presenter that evening was Maureen Martin who gave demonstrations on Irish Dancing. She also instructed some of us, with varying degrees of success. I would highly recommend her for performing at other clubs.

Our annual Christmas Party will be held on Tuesday, December 14, 2004, at the Coliseum Bar. The social hour, raffle, dinner and entertainment will run from 5:30 p.m. to approximately 8:15 p.m. Those who would like to contribute something for the raffle should contact club member Jim Bennett at 838-3739. The entertainment will feature some Celtic Rock music with some seasonal music, also. I realize it is challenging for many to attend the monthly meetings. Hopefully, many of you can find the time and energy to join us for the Christmas Party. Any questions feel free to contact me at (608) 833-0009 or email me at ccimgmt@supranet.com.

– **Bob Kerans**

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## Rock County

### UPCOMING EVENTS

- DECEMBER 21 – Christmas Party at the Janesville Senior Center
- JANUARY 18 – Regular Membership Meeting, 7 p.m.

Our Christmas Party will be potluck. One of our members is bringing the main meat entree. The other members can bring any other dish or a dessert. Bring your own table service and a dozen of your favorite homemade Christmas cookies. The club will furnish the coffee.

After dinner we will have a White Elephant gift exchange. You may have some article in your home that you have enjoyed for years and now, to make more space in your home, you feel it is time for someone else to enjoy it. Wrap it up and bring it to the White Elephant gift exchange. We look forward to everybody coming to the Christmas Party.

At our January meeting we will have our version of the Antiques Road Show. We hope to have an antique dealer, at that meeting, to appraise our antiques.

– **Tom Kennedy**

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## **Milwaukee President's Message**

Nollaig Shona Duit from all of your Board members and officers. May this month of December be a happy and blessed one for your family and loved ones. Remember the men and women serving this country in our military, especially those that may be in harms way, with a prayer.

A Christmas memory of high mass and benediction at St Patrick's in Erin Prairie when we were allowed to stay up and attend midnight mass is a great one. It reminds me of the fact that this memory stays with me, and not that of a gift which I received in those years. Our priest was Father James Griffin, and it was a mass attended each year with all family members in tow. Most of the parishioners were of Irish heritage, and felt privileged to worship in a free country. A Christmas tradition you might want to continue from Ireland would be to have a lighted candle in the window. This was begun to light the way for the holy family and the door was left open in the evening with food on the table in the event a stranger needed hospitality or refuge. Leaving the door open is not recommended, but the hospitality certainly is. St. Stephen's Day is the 26th of the month and was the day to exchange gifts some time ago. Still celebrated to some extent in Ireland and would be a nice family day here.

We hope many of you are able to attend our December

meeting at the ICHC since we will be celebrating with a Christmas party and there will be no business meeting. Unfortunately, because of space limits, this party is a member's only event limited to 100 persons only. This year we ask you to RSVP to be certain there's enough for all to enjoy. Please call KerryJo at (414) 769-1250 if you didn't sign up at the November meeting. We hope the weather will cooperate, and you will share the fun. If possible, there may be a few surprises that evening, and we will have a nice meal to share together. All we ask is for you to attend and bring some Christmas memory stories with you. Also, a big thank you to Kinsella Academy for their performance at the November meeting.

Congratulations to the chairpersons at Folk Fair, Kris Pluskota as the General Chair, Pete and Fran Dundon at the food booth, Noreen Barclay at the Sales Booth, and our new Cultural Booth chair, Marianne Fisher. All of you made this club, and Ireland look like the great spot it is. Cashel-Dennehy and Glencastle Irish Dancers were crowd favorites, and I offer accolades to all of you. For all of you that volunteered, it's greatly appreciated by all of the community. Good job!

As this year winds down to a close, we also want to thank all of you for your volunteer work this year. Without the effort of all of you, none of this would be possible. May your New Year's Eve be wonderful, and safe. We want all of you back for 2005 and the celebration of the club's 45th anniversary. You will hear more on this shortly.

We are sorry to inform any of you that may not be aware, that we no longer are volunteers at the Bradley Center. Not enough persons were able to step forward to fill our commitment for this fundraising, and we could not go forth. For those of you that gave so many years to this, God bless. The money certainly was hard earned, and the donations we were able to do to advance our heritage, will mean some changes in the future. Our Board will be reviewing expenditures and new fundraising options that may be needed.

See you at the next meeting in 2005.

– Julie Smith

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## Young Members' Achievements

Our young member Maeve Smith is congratulated for winning three gold medals at her first feis in California. Another young member Colleen Jaskulski is congratulated in being elected to her student council. Member Erin Stephens was selected as a member of the academic review board at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Shannon Stroud was awarded a scholarship to Alverno College. She is currently a student at St. Joan Antida High School. We're proud of all of you.

– Julie Smith

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## **Shamrock Club At Museum Dec. 5**

The Shamrock Club will be a part of the Christmas festivities at the Milwaukee Museum on Sunday, December 5. We can be found in the European Village from 11 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. We will be part of the “A Season of Wonder” holiday activities.

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## **Celtic Women First Friday Lecture Series**

Friday Dec. 3 “Threaded Metaphors”. An exhibition of this work will have its opening this evening at the ICHC, following the First Friday lecture. “Threaded Metaphors” presents the work of five fiber artists and five poets. The quilters Connie Tresch, Judith Zoelzer-Levine, Pat Zalewski and Sarah Williams, and weaver Margaret Magill exchanged work in a “blind trade” with poets Phyllis Wax, C J Muchhala, Margaret Rozza, Mara Ptacek and Helen Padway. From this cross-media stimulation the poets and fiber artists created the visual and verbal art of “Threaded Metaphors”. This group will present poetry readings and comments by the poets, known as “Sparks”, and comments by the fiber artists.

The Bowed Psaltery Ensemble led by C.C. Westgaard will present a musical interlude as a background for the craft tables and Christmas treats provided by you, the attendees.

The lectures are held at the Irish Cultural and Heritage Center, 2133 W. Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee. Lectures begin at 5:30 p.m. until 7 p.m. and are open to the public. \$5 admission for all. Join us for tea and treats? to hear these original and unique presenters. The December lecture will be followed by the official opening of the Threaded Metaphors exhibit, with everyone invited. The exhibit is free.

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## **ICHC Hallamór Fall Series Concert #5**

**JODEE JAMES & TALYBONT**  
**Saturday, December 11**

Jodee James is a folk singer-songwriter with a voice that has been described as that of a nightingale. Her songs are in both English and Welsh, the language of her father's family homeland. She has been studying and passing the knowledge and lore onto others; thereby kindling an interest in things Welsh, especially in those who already have a great desire to know things Celtic. She spins century old tales with her own deft touches to create modern settings for ancient Welsh music and lore.

Jodee's band is named Talybont. It is comprised of Jodee James: vocals and guitar; Clarence Ferrari: fiddle; Arlene Muzyka: percussion; and, Sally Tucker: harp.

This is a Celtic (Welsh) Christmas program. It is sponsored by Derry Hegarty's Irish Pub.

Concert begins 8 p.m.

Opening Act (7 p.m) Celia Ferran: singer/songwriter,  
storyteller

ICHC • (414) 345-8800

Tickets: \$19 Adv/reserved, \$21 Door

– **Gwen Sisk, Publicist**

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## **Color Guard News and Notes**

## **“PRIDE AND HONOR”**

The Shamrock Club of Wisconsin's Color Guard Pipes and Drums parade schedule reached its conclusion at the Sister Bay Festival Parade in Door County on Saturday, October 16, 2004. Despite 40 degree temperatures, rain and wind, the Unit represented the members of the Shamrock Club with “Pride and Honor.”

The Color Guard, Pipes and Drums, once again, were able to collect donation for their “Food for the Needy” to feed over 25-30 families at Thanksgiving, through the St. Patrick's Help Fund. The Unit is currently in the process of collecting clean clothing for our “Clothing for Christmas” program, also in an effort to assist Katy and Bob Voss and the St. Patrick's Help Fund. Please, if you have clean clothing, you neither wear nor need anymore – what a great time to clean out the closets and feel good about helping those who are less fortunate. Please contact the Color Guard and/or Katy and Bob Voss. You can drop off your “gifts” at the ICHC or for “pick-up” service, contact Richard Stover at (414) 476-6666, to arrange a day, date and time. “Merry Christmas” to all – from your Color Guard, Pipes and Drums!

The Shamrock Club of Wisconsin Color Guard, Pipes and Drums 25th Anniversary Dinner Dance is really taking form rapidly. This is one event you do not want to miss. Interest in attending is unbelievable, so when the reservation form is printed in Emerald Reflections, don't wait too long because seating will be on a first come, first serve basis.

## **A SPECIAL TRIBUTE**

*When Someone You Love Becomes a Memory  
The Memory Becomes a Treasure*

On Tuesday, October 5, 2004 we, all of us, lost a very special human being – Tom Neville. A friend, loving husband, father, grandfather, member of the Shamrock Club of Wisconsin, and an original member of the Color Guard, Pipes and Drums.

Tom – he was like a Knight from days long ago. God, family, and country were his foundations. Passion, caring, giving, loving and understanding for others were his trademarks. No one could spend a few moments with Tom and not walk away with a better understanding of life, pride, honor and not only a history of Ireland, but the true meaning of what it means to be

Irish.

Thank you, from the bottom of our hearts to the Neville Family, for allowing the Color Guard, Pipes and Drums to participate in the celebration of Tom's life. Now, we all have a special "angel" in heaven looking over us.

My personal sentiments can be summed up this way:

*Heavenly Father, open your arms  
to receive the soul  
of one who lived and died  
the purest Knight of all.*

God Bless and Thank You for coming into our lives!

*THOMAS J. NEVILLE, JR.  
March 29, 1931 – October 5, 2004*

In the next issue of Emerald Reflections, Rich Pfeiffer, director of the Shamrock Club of Wisconsin Color Guard, Pipes and Drums will give his annual "Director's Address." Rich will be looking back and giving an overview of the Unit's 2004 parade/event season, as well as offering some thoughts, hopes and expectations for the upcoming 2005 season. As in past years this is one article that you really don't want to miss.

If you would like to have the Shamrock Club Color Guard, Pipes and Drums appear in a parade, special event or family occasion – or you would like to join the Unit as a banner carrier, color guard, piper or drummer, please contact:

Richard Pfeiffer, Director  
Shamrock Club Color Guard, Pipes and Drums  
Telephone: (414) 769-1250  
E-mail: milwpiper@cs.com

– Richard Stover

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## **St. Patrick's Help Fund**

St. Patrick's Help Fund is in desperate need of school supplies and non-perishable foods. Please place in container at each meeting. However, donations can be brought to the ICHC any time during the week. Questions? Call Katy Voss (414) 352-6479.

## **New Members**

NOTE: Please send your dues to your Membership Chairperson in your chapter. All names and addresses are listed in Emerald Reflections.

Milwaukee – Don Amby; Eileen F. Hobbs; Karen Nielson.

### **MILWAUKEE CHAPTER MEMBERSHIP REPORT:**

- Sept.: 37 memberships up for renewal, 28 paid, 9 dropped for nonpayment.
- Oct.: 30 memberships up for renewal, 25 paid, 5 due.
- Nov.: 33 memberships up for renewal, 4 paid, 29 due.

– **Tom Smith**