

# Irish Americans shaped Portland as we know it

"Irish need not apply."

I can still hear my mother reciting these words in stories of her childhood. These signs, once posted throughout store windows of Portland, never deterred my grandparents from providing their family with the opportunities of education and religion that they were denied in Ireland.

Looking around Portland today, I can hardly believe there was a time when Irish pride did not permeate the city's communities.

Every year when St. Patrick's Day draws near, I find myself more acutely aware of my Irish heritage and how hard my ancestors fought so I could be who I am now. Take the wearing of green on this holiday. This is not only a sign of Irish pride, but also a symbol of the freedom the Irish gained by coming to America. For a time, the British outlawed most anything Irish in Ireland – including the wearing of green (for it symbolized the color of Irish Catholicism), the schooling of Irish children and even the celebrating of Catholic Masses.

America meant freedom to my grandparents and while it was hard, they came here and built their future – and the future of Portland.

As longshoremen and fishermen,

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my Irish family and friends did more than build ships and docks – they built communities that acted as families, they fostered traditions of pride and hard work and they left a legacy founded in the importance of generosity. For me, these qualities mean the Irish and the Mainer are really one in the same.

When the Irish came here, they readily built churches where they could practice their religion openly. St. Dominic's (now the Irish Heritage Center) was built through volunteer efforts by men and women who spent their days building ships in the harbor or cleaning houses on the Western Prom. If you look carefully

at St. Dom's you will see how much it resembles a traditional Catholic church in Ireland.

We were also very involved in politics. Our church, St. Patrick's in Portland, is the only church in the country that has politicians in the stained glass: President Kennedy and his brother, Robert Kennedy. One of my uncles, Joe Brennan, served as governor and in the Congress. The entire family was involved with helping him. In Ireland we would have had no say. Here my grandparents encouraged us to be involved.

So this St. Patrick's Day, as I prepare for a welcomed slew of family members – both near and extended – I am reminded of the true meaning behind the day, to celebrate my past and to honor those people who made my life of comfort and freedom a reality.

It is an unwavering belief in the possibility of the American Dream, even in the face of adversity, that is worth the holiday reveling. My Irish upbringing shaped my character and instilled in me the importance of family and community. Moreover, it's the reason I look around and recognize the local pride in our history that binds us all together.

– *Special to the Telegram*