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*“Monstrous Parades” and “Patriotic Celebrations”: Dynamic Cultural Identities of the Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Butte Irish*

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### *Introduction*

In his seminal book *The Butte Irish*, David Emmons describes Butte’s extraordinary Saint Patrick’s Day parade of 1915. Emmons depicts this particular parade, the first St. Patrick’s Day since the Great War began, as weaving through the German and Austrian neighborhoods of Butte. The large contingent of Irish participants marched alongside a smaller cohort of German immigrants: “In this annual festival of an Irish saint... German, Irish, and American flags were carried, prompting one Butte newspaper to report... ‘for the first time in the history of the world, perhaps,’ the flags of three nations were flown on St. Patrick’s Day.” Emmons points out that the following year, 1916, was the first time in over a decade that Butte’s St. Patrick’s Day festivities were canceled from the negative reactions to 1915’s overt expression of Irish-German alliance.<sup>1</sup>

From the late nineteenth century through the mid twentieth century, parades and public celebrations, especially St. Patrick’s Day and the Fourth of July, reveal the Irish community’s interests in Butte. Just as public reactions led the Butte Irish to redefine their relationship with their German neighbors for 1915’s parade and then again after it, both St. Patrick’s Day and the Fourth of July show a fluid ethnic identity within the Irish community, trending towards a blended Irish American identity as opposed to solely an Irish or American identity.

Many scholars have written about the Irish in Butte and Irish American communities in general. This paper attempts to build upon their work by arguing that that the Butte Irish used

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<sup>1</sup> David M. Emmons. *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 348.

these celebrations to continuously revise their ethnic identity over time, that this community trended towards a hybrid Irish-American (as opposed to solely an Irish or American) identity.

Catherine Dowling's piece on Irish Nationalism in Butte is vital for questions about cultural identity in public spaces. Examining schools and parades, Dowling recognizes the presence of both Irish and American identities but seems to favor the idea that some Butte families, especially women, "abandoned the traditions and memories of their homeland and more readily concentrated on becoming Americans."<sup>2</sup> Looking carefully at St. Patrick's Day and Fourth of July reveals a more dynamic process of identity formation involving retention and blending, rather than a linear story of abandoning Irish traditions over American ones.

### *Social Context for the Establishment of the Butte Irish Community*

In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, the mining industry prompted droves of itinerant mine workers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds – including Irish – to move to Butte. As Butte's mining industry proved profitable, these miners made their homes in Butte more permanent. Dowling notes that the Butte Irish community was strengthened by the fact that family from Ireland would reunite and settle together there.<sup>3</sup> By 1900, not only were they the largest ethnic community in Butte, but their proportion of Butte's population was higher than the Irish population in any other city in the United States. For this reason, Butte offers a good case study for examining Irish immigrant identities and cultural allegiances in the United States.

Irish social organizations, such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians, allowed the Butte Irish community to maintain their Irish identity in a new country. While branches of these

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Dowling, "Irish-American Nationalism in Butte, 1900-1916." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 39, no. 2 (1989): 50-63, 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

organizations existed in cities all over America, Butte's Irish social organizations seemed particularly active and enthusiastic.<sup>4</sup> Through their shared heritage, these groups created a cohesive Irish community in Butte. Some of these organizations functioned as social clubs, while others more actively focused on Irish political issues.<sup>5</sup> Hosting lectures and fundraisers in support of Irish nationalism, the interest of Butte's Irish in Irish politics gave them coherence and urgency. One way Irish Americans maintained close relationships with their families who remained in Ireland was through consistent communication and political advocacy.<sup>6</sup>

Various Irish community organizations held lectures in which guest speakers would discuss relevant political news from Ireland. In 1921, the Ladies Auxiliary Ancient Order of Hibernians extended an invitation to a lecture of a woman who "is a very close friend of the leaders of the Republic of Ireland,"<sup>7</sup> proving the value that the Butte Irish placed on connections to Ireland and the current events there. A later lecture invitation from the Ancient Order of Hibernians boasted a speaker named Reverend M.M. English who spoke "on his recent experiences in Ireland and how to protect against the British atrocities in that country." The invitation was signed "Yours for the Irish Republic."<sup>8</sup> These invitations and lectures illustrate the level of involvement that the Butte Irish maintained in Ireland's politics.

The Irish in Butte also adopted an American identity. The following excerpt from a letter asking for money in support of the newly independent Irish nation encapsulates this duality: "As true Americans we owe it to Ireland to come to her aid in this crucial hour... No true American can fail to respond to the appeal made by President de Valera on behalf of the Irish people,

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<sup>4</sup> David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish*, 13, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Dowling, "Irish-American Nationalism in Butte," 55.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Childs Merwin, "The Irish in American Life," *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 77, 1896, pp. 289-301.

<sup>7</sup> Lecture Invitation from L.A.A.O.H to R.E.L.A., 3 April 1921, Reel 1, Butte Irish Collection, Mss 112, Archives and Special Collections, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, The University of Montana-Missoula, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Lecture Invitation from A.O.H to R.E.L.A., 23 September 1920, Reel 1, Butte Irish Collection, Mss 112, Archives and Special Collections, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, The University of Montana-Missoula, 1983.

wherein he so eloquently says: ‘Americans of Irish blood you will not refuse to renew your filial ties... She is your Motherland as well as ours.’”<sup>9</sup> Cultural identity was likely a point of confusion in the Butte Irish community. This letter’s use of “true American” inspires a sense of belonging as authentic Americans, which was reassuring to the Butte Irish. This letter, sent to an immigrant community that had escaped the political turmoil of Ireland, also sends a message of obligation. The Irish American hybrid identity was felt within the Butte Irish community but also used by outsiders, such as Eamon De Valera, as an emotional appeal for the Irish cause.

Eamon De Valera, the newly independent Republic of Ireland’s president, not only wrote to Butte but also visited the city in late July of 1919. The massive crowds greeting him illustrate the cultural hybridity experienced within the Butte Irish community and seen by outsiders. In an *Anaconda Standard* article written directly by De Valera, he compared the injustices of British imperialism to the wrongs of Germany in the Great War. He asked for “justice that will look upon Britain as scrutinizingly as it did on Germany,” reflecting both the anger in Ireland against Britain and the change in opinion toward Germany following the Great War.<sup>10</sup> The ability to bring justice to Ireland, De Valera believed, was in the hands of the American people. American values of freedom and independence could be used as a weapon against the imperialistic British. This is evidenced by De Valera’s appeals for support, in which he dubbed Americans as “natural leaders in the cause of human liberty.” He proclaimed that “The cause which American public opinion aligns itself behind today as being just, the whole world will accept and support tomorrow.”<sup>11</sup> Articles such as these acknowledge the duality of Butte Irish identity.

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<sup>9</sup> Financial Appeal to Butte Irish, 15 November 1919, Reel 1, Butte Irish Collection, Mss 112, Archives and Special Collections, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, The University of Montana-Missoula, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> “On All Things For Which Britain Arraigned Germany Irish People Arraign Britain, Says De Valera.” *Anaconda Standard*, July 26, 1919.

<sup>11</sup> “Irish Question is World Issue De Valera Says.” *Anaconda Standard*, July 26, 1919.

De Valera's appeals show an outsider's perception that Irish Americans were in a unique position of influence. For Irish Americans themselves, such as the Butte Irish community, there were clearly parallels between American and Irish independence. One article in the *Standard* praises De Valera as a leader for Irish freedom by declaring, "The Standard fails to see any difference between George Washington and Eamonn De Valera."<sup>12</sup> George Washington, a war-time leader against Britain and then the first president of the United States, was synonymous with American values. Bestowing this same heroic, near-legendary status on De Valera, in another fight against Britain, reflects their desire to connect the revolutionary destinies of both nations and is representative of the hybridized identity of the Butte Irish community.

### *Saint Patrick's Day in Butte*

Within Ireland, Saint Patrick's Day was a religious and agricultural celebration marking the midpoint of springtime, when many farmers planted their potato crop.<sup>13</sup> Irish Americans adopted St. Patrick's Day as a means of celebrating their ethnic heritage and an opportunity to display symbols of Irishness. In Butte, the holiday grew more elaborate each year, starting in the late nineteenth century. At the height of its magnificence, Butte's St. Patrick's Day involved numerous public events over the course of multiple days. Irish social organizations in Butte planned these St. Patrick's Day exciting events. One 1919 letter asked for the help of all Irish societies in Butte in order to make their "monstrous parade" a success.<sup>14</sup> Events hosted by Irish born or first-generation Irish Americans, the authentically Irish, sold out of tickets

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<sup>12</sup> "De Valera." *Anaconda Standard*, July 26, 1919.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Danaher. *The Year in Ireland*, 65-66.

<sup>14</sup> Call for a Monstrous Parade, 20 January, 1919, Reel 1, Butte Irish Collection, Mss 112, Archives and Special Collections, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, The University of Montana-Missoula, 1983.

quickly.<sup>15</sup> Not only were the St. Patrick's Day parades of Butte exuberant and well attended, they also contained intriguing and conflicting expressions of identity.

Acts and symbols of American patriotism such as songs and flags appeared prominently alongside icons of Irish identity in many of Butte's St. Patrick's Day celebrations. St. Patrick's Day in Butte was also, therefore, an opportunity to pledge allegiance to America. As Dowling observes, "Elaborate displays of Irishness, both in rhetoric and action, were inseparable from conspicuous demonstrations of their loyalty to the United States."<sup>16</sup> Contrary to Dowling's argument, this did not mean that the fervor of Irish pride was replaced by American patriotism. Irish and American identities coexisted, blending into a hybrid identity, and trending more towards one identity or the other depending on the political or social circumstances of the time.

One example of this hybridity is in the music of St. Patrick's Day. Performers from Irish societies played Irish tunes alongside American songs. Dowling notes this pattern, finding that "No St. Patrick's Day celebration was complete without a rendering of 'You're a Grand Old Flag' and the 'Star-Spangled Banner.'"<sup>17</sup> A notable example of this phenomenon occurred in 1886, when St. Patrick's Day mass music featured both "Killarney" and "Yankee Doodle."<sup>18</sup> This American patriotism was private, as part of a Catholic mass, suggesting a truly independent choice to play American songs on an Irish holiday, rather than an obligatory display.

Through the orations on St. Patrick's Day, the Butte Irish community furthered the Irish cause from their position in a free country. The orations before Irish independence reflect a prominent focus on Irish political causes. The community used the holiday to inspire non-Irish support. The *Butte Daily Miner* described St. Patrick's Day 1886, "as a day which helped their

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<sup>15</sup> "Irish Women Will Sponsor Banquet." *Montana Standard*, March 11, 1934.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Dowling. "Irish-American Nationalism in Butte," 58.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> "Ireland's Patron Saint: How St. Patrick's Day Was Celebrated in Butte." *Butte Daily Miner*. March 18, 1886.

common cause and awakened new interest in Irish affairs in the breasts of those fellow citizens to whom the Emerald Isle is not endeared by ties of birth or ancestry.”<sup>19</sup> One speech from a local priest, Father Tremblay, asked for prayers for “the fate of the Irish church.”<sup>20</sup> The events on St. Patrick’s Day reflected an appreciation for American ideals while simultaneously hoping for Ireland’s escape from political oppression, cultural suppression, and religious persecution.

The decorations displayed at the various St. Patrick’s Day events also contained both American and Irish symbols. In 1886, the *Daily Miner* described a banquet hall decorated with “the green flags of Erin blending harmoniously with the red, white and blue banners and streamers of Uncle Sam.”<sup>21</sup> The description of Ireland’s (Erin’s) union with America, or Uncle Sam, couples these nations. This symbolic language and the decorations in the banquet hall are representative of the community’s hybrid identity as children of Erin and Uncle Sam.

While St. Patrick’s Day was a holiday celebrating national pride, the public celebrations of St. Patrick’s Day in Butte repeatedly show the presence of an American identity. In fact, in an effort to boost morale during World War II, the city of Butte decided to forgo their 1942 St. Patrick’s Day festivities and instead solely focus their celebration on America. The *Standard* reported that the Irish community kept Ireland in their minds but devoted “their first and main thoughts to winning the war, fighting for a country that gave them freedom.”<sup>22</sup> This active choice reveals a fluid identity, where they hold their Irish ancestry close, but allow their American citizenship to dominate during a time of global unrest.

The prominence of American identity on St. Patrick’s Day can be attributed to an embracing of American ideals or culture, but also the aspirations that the Butte Irish community

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<sup>19</sup> “Ireland’s Patron Saint: How St. Patrick’s Day Was Celebrated in Butte.” *Butte Daily Miner*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> “Sullivans Not to Celebrate Today.” *Montana Standard*. March 17, 1942.

had for the Republic of Ireland. Henry Childs Merwin wrote that “the Irish... have always exhibited a certain shame at being Irish instead of American.”<sup>23</sup> The enthusiasm displayed on St. Patrick’s Day in Butte refutes his point. In 1938, the *Standard* nostalgically described the thoughts of the Butte Irish turning “to the beautiful isle over which there now floats a flag of freedom,”<sup>24</sup> which represents the hope felt in Butte on St. Patrick’s Day and an appreciation for freedom, which evokes America with gratitude as well.

#### *Fourth of July in Butte*

The Fourth of July is a time to remember the values that Americans fought for in the Revolutionary War. Even before Montana received statehood status in 1889, the Territory celebrated July 4th heartily. The *Daily Miner* described Butte’s 1883 celebrations as “the most extensive and beautiful ever witnessed in the Territory.”<sup>25</sup> An advertisement from the same year described a day filled with music, speeches, and dancing. The schedule included a sunrise salute with thirty-eight guns and a reading of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>26</sup> The fireworks display was titled “Goddess of Liberty.”<sup>27</sup>

More actively than St. Patrick’s Day, the Fourth of July shows the constant renegotiation of identity among the Butte Irish community to match the political climate. One form that July 4th celebrations in Butte often took was as both an opportunity to fundraise for Irish republicanism and to review American history as an inspiration for Irish independence from the British. One 1886 *Daily Miner* article declared that “the enthusiasm engendered by the Fourth of

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<sup>23</sup> Henry Childs Merwin. “The Irish in American Life,” 290.

<sup>24</sup> “St. Patrick’s Day.” *Montana Standard*, March 17, 1938.

<sup>25</sup> “Local News.” *Butte Daily Miner*, June 26, 1883.

<sup>26</sup> “July Fourth: How the Nation’s Day Was Celebrated.” *Butte Daily Miner*, July 7, 1885.

<sup>27</sup> “Local News.” *Butte Daily Miner*.



July should help along the Irish cause. The desire for freedom is contagious.”<sup>28</sup> The use of the Fourth of July as a fundraising opportunity for the cause of Irish freedom illustrates the active expression of dual identity within the Butte Irish community.

A large piece on July 4th from the *Daily Miner* in 1885 reflects on the wrongdoings of England using direct quotes from a speech given on that day. One of the main points of this article was the continued importance of freedom of religion and civil liberties in America. The piece described America as a place of refuge from tyranny, but also as a place of power, exerting “influence... over the destiny of other nations.”<sup>29</sup> The idea that America has the power to impact the future of other nations conveyed a sense of hope to the Butte Irish community as they thought of their oppressed homeland. Newspaper articles such as this one that demonized tyranny on the Fourth of July suggest that the Irish community in Butte embraced the holiday so fervently in part because it was an opportunity to ascribe American values onto the Irish cause.

As Irish social organizations performed in parades and hosted picnics and dances on the Fourth of July, the community claimed the hybrid identity as Irish American. As Dowling points out, “Patriotic displays became a common feature of public life in the Irish community. The RELA Fife and Drum Corps, the AOH Fife and Bugle Corps, and the Meagher Guards took part prominently in the Fourth of July parades.”<sup>30</sup> The Irish bands became a valuable part of the Fourth of July celebrations, with bands such as the Emmet Guard Band performing twice in the programming for the year 1886.<sup>31</sup> In the same program were picnics, hosted by many different Irish social organizations. The participation of the Irish social organizations in Fourth of July festivities evidences a seamless blending of Irish and American communities and traditions.

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<sup>28</sup> “Meeting of the Territorial Democratic Committee.” *Butte Daily Miner*, July 7, 1886.

<sup>29</sup> “July Fourth: How the Nation’s Day Was Celebrated.” *Butte Daily Miner*.

<sup>30</sup> Catherine Dowling. “Irish-American Nationalism in Butte,” 58.

<sup>31</sup> “To-day’s Celebration: A Revised Programme of the Day’s Festivities in Butte.” *Butte Daily Miner*, July 5, 1886.

*Conclusion*

The Butte Irish community of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was not purely Irish, nor was it completely American. The community shifted its allegiances to adopt a more overtly American or Irish identity depending on the cultural and political context. Before Irish independence, the Butte Irish community used both St. Patrick's Day and the Fourth of July to raise money for the Irish republican cause, to support America in times of war, and also to speak publicly about Irish and American issues. Dowling argues that Irish culture in Butte was damaged because families showed preference to American traditions and children were instructed to learn how to be more American at school, but the evidence suggests that it was possible for the Butte Irish to hold two different cultural identities simultaneously.

Today's Butte Irish community maintains this pattern. In 2019, St. Patrick's Day mass featured both American and Irish flags. The homily, from an Irish-born priest, spoke of preserving Irish language and religion, using American resources and universities. In the parade through nearby Anaconda, the Ancient Order of Hibernian's Pipe and Drum band performed "America, The Beautiful" as they marched past Irish Copper King Marcus Daly's home. Although now most Butte Irish are many generations removed from their Irish heritage, Irish and American identities are still equally important and compatible to the community.