



HISTORY OF THE NAPLES PARADE

PRESENTED BY NAPLES ST. PATRICK FOUNDATION, INC.

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Naples St. Patrick's Day had its modest beginning back in 1976 when Fr. Thomas Goggin, a proud Irishman and a priest at St. Ann Parish led a group of like-minded Irish from St. Louis, Mo. and marched around the Church grounds to celebrate The Grand Day and, thus, the St. Patrick's Day tradition began in Naples. A few months later, Father Goggin spoke with Pat McDonald, Mike Joynt, Dick Keogh and Gerry Deppe to organize a St. Patrick's Day Celebration. Pat McDonald agreed to be Chairman and the Parade Committee began.

Dick Keogh was the working force and was instrumental in procuring the BagPipe Band from Malden, MA for the next ten years. The advertising and public relations job was taken on by Gerry Deppe and Mike Joynt provided 300 corned beef sandwiches from his catering business made by the women of St. Ann's Parish for the wrap after the parade in the St. Ann's gym. Fr. Goggin always had the St. Ann's School children march in the Parade. Other interested folks jumped in, marched, and off they would go. These men were the backbone of the Parade Committee for years.

A few years later, the Committee met at The Dock Restaurant enlisting owner Vinnie DePasquale's long term support of the Parade. For over 20 years Mr. DePasquale has generously underwritten free coffee and Danish for everyone attending The Annual Flag Raising where the American Flag and the Irish Flag are raised and both National Anthems are played followed by a brief program which takes place the morning of the Parade at the Dock Restaurant. In 2019 The Dock Restaurant was sold to Dan Groom and he has generously continued the tradition of Mr. DePasquale.

Bob Leydon was in charge of growing the Parade and in 1992, The Naples Daily News Band and Estero High School Band took part and 1,000 marchers made up the Parade. **At this point, the Naples St. Patrick's Day Parade was the largest Parade in Southwest Florida.**

1998 marked the beginning of new changes for the Parade Committee with the untimely death of Dick Keogh. In 1999, after serving as Parade Chairman for many years, Pat



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McDonald and Bob Leydon felt it was time to resign and a call went out for volunteers at the Irish American Club.

With no prospects in sight, Betty Finnegan volunteered her husband, John to give a hand at reorganizing. Both had long experience in Boston Parade Celebrations and, in 2000 Bob Leydon and John Finnegan co-chaired the Parade and Don Sullivan took over The Flag Raising, enhancing the ceremony with great results. In 2001, Bob retired and John became Chairman. Reorganizing included a new structure, thus, the advent of The St. Patrick Parade Celebrations Committee. John Finnegan served as President, John Harris served as Treasurer and Bev Harris served as Secretary and Marty Barrett continued as Parade Chief Marshall. The goals were to recruit new active members, to expand activities as part of the celebrations and to fund raise to pay for the expansion. John met with Phil McCabe of the Inn on Fifth both of whom came from Dorchester, MA and Phil generously agreed to be a major sponsor, volunteering to host an Annual St. Patrick's Dinner and Musical Gala which was the primary funding for the Parade. Phil provided the Ballroom and Roof Deck, food, door prizes and more. In addition, the business community and private parties supported us through their generous donations to the silent auction as well as financial donations. While events have changed as we have grown, Phil has remained a generous sponsor of the Parade.

The Committee added many active volunteers among them Pat Mahoney, Kim Heaslip, Janet Sheehan, Pat Finnegan, Liz Finnegan, Helena Finnegan, Ray O'Connor, Norma Casey, Mike Joynt, Lisa Fleming, Mike Ward. In 2003, Marty Barrett retired as Parade Marshal and Pat Mahoney stepped into his place where he has admirably organized, recruited the 50+ marshals for Parade Day and helped grow the Parade as we know it today. Janet Sheehan took over for Bev Harris who stayed on working with John in the Treasury department. Betty Finnegan took over the Gala and worked on fundraising; Pat Finnegan organized the Little Miss Smiling Eyes event; Kim Heaslip took on organizational jobs such as communications and the web site to mention a few. These events are filled with details requiring many hands and each member pitched in wherever necessary. One goal of fundraising was to become a foundation which would continue to foster Irish culture and be a vehicle for raising funds necessary to continue



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what has become a major Cultural Event in Naples. When John and Bev Harris retired in 2009 Kim Heaslip became the Treasurer.

In 2003 the Parade Committee sponsored The First Annual Pub Crawl as one of its fundraisers. Patrick Mahoney recalls that “in the old days, the Parade Committee had a group of bagpipers go to the various watering holes along Fifth Avenue S, announcing to all that the Parade would be held the following day.” Patrick recalls that it was fun to follow the bagpipers; in fact, so much fun that Patrick suggested to the Committee that we rent a trolley and sponsor a pub crawl. The first year we filled six trolleys – “Naples Largest Moving Land Party.” Mahoney says that people like going to the pub crawl each year. They like walking into various pubs with a bagpiper leading the way.

We can all thank Naples resident John Finnegan and his wife Betty, who worked alongside him and organized the Annual St. Patrick’s Gala at The Inn on Fifth each year, for bringing the Parade to the level of acclaim it has today. Our Parade has a reputation on par with those in Savannah, Boston, Chicago and Dublin. Finnegan helped the Parade grow from a few thousand attendees to over 40,000 people. To make this possible, the Committee recruited volunteers and expanded the number of participating high school bands by giving scholarships to all bands that participated in the Parade. Our name changed to The Naples St. Patrick Parade and Scholarship Society.

The Naples Daily News on March 20, 2007 ran the following editorial regarding the St. Patrick’s Day Parade

A GRAND TIME FOR THE IRISH (AND THOUSANDS OF FRIENDS)

Relatively few of us around today remember when the Naples St. Patrick’s Day Parade started some 29 years ago. Even if we were here then, the parade was so small it was easy to miss – an improvisational procession celebrating real and wannabe Irish heritage and an excuse for a morning toast.



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What thousands of Southwest Floridians witnessed this past Saturday was something much, much different. The Naples St. Patrick's 'day Parade has evolved into a social phenomenon, assembling marching bands, sports teams, and others on foot and floats from throughout our area and the northeastern United States.

Local and out-of-town high school bands lend their special brand of excitement.

Big fun, to be sure, for participants and spectators alike.

Event organizers are due a mighty pat on the back for their mammoth feat of organization. This parade now has a Web site – stpatricksparadenaples.com – an informational telephone hot line and even a line of official merchandise.

all-volunteer group's Web site estimated 35,000 to 40,000 people would attend, and with ideal weather on a St. Patrick's Day that actually fell on a Saturday, the prediction came true.

In fact, we venture that the Naples parade is one of the largest, if not the largest, St. Patrick's Day parade in America south of Savannah.

Collier county and all of southwest Florida love a parade. We have almost as many parades per capita as we have golf courses. But this St. Patrick's Day parade raises, pardon the expression, the bar for them all.

In 2009, John Finnegan recruited Jim McEvoy, former Fire Commissioner and native Bostonian to take over as President of the Parade Committee. John retired and Jim took over the reins in 2010 and immediately went to work on developing The Naples St. Patrick Foundation, a 501 (c)3 tax exempt entity. A great feat! The first meeting of the Foundation on November 11, 2011, with Jim McEvoy officiating as President, Pat Mahoney, Vice President, Kim Heaslip, Treasurer, Janet Sheehan, Secretary, Mike Joynt and John Finnegan, Chairman Emeritus. At this meeting Mike



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Joynt announced that the Irish American Club had formally closed. Patrick Mahoney resigned as Chief Parade Marshal shortly thereafter.

At the January 14, 2015, Meeting of the Foundation Kim Heaslip introduced Patrick Kirk as the new Chief Parade Marshal. Also, at this meeting Bernard McLoughlin was nominated and elected to the position of Executive Director. Mary Alice Balboni and Barry Hoey joined the Board.

At the Foundation's Annual Meeting held on March 25, 2015, Jim McEvoy announced his resignation as President and Kim Heaslip, another Massachusetts native, was elected President of The Foundation, Bernard McLoughlin Vice President, Janet F. Sheehan, Secretary and Deborah McLoughlin, Treasurer. Patrick Kirk our Chief Parade Marshal was elected a voting member of the Board as was Anthony Dwyer. Jim McEvoy resigned from the Board but accepted the nomination of Bernie McLoughlin to be an Ex-Officio non-voting board member.

The year 2020 was a memorable year for the entire world because of the Covid outbreak and the Parade was cancelled for the first time. Covid was still raging in 2021 and The Foundation, through Autumn Consulting, sponsored "a social distance version" of The Parade via a boat excursion on Naples Princess Cruise from Naples Bay to Keewaydin that included lunch. The year 2022 saw the Parade return to the streets of Naples.

Through the years Board members have resigned for various reasons. Today the Foundation Board consists of Kim Heaslip, President, Patrick Kirk, Chief Parade Marshal, Janet Sheehan, Secretary, Maryalice Balboni. Nathan Misirian, President of Autumn Consulting is a strategic partner and vendor to the Foundation since 2021.