The Irish of Manitowoc County:
Maintaining Ethnic Identity in a Rural Community

Senior Thesis
History 489
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Abstract:

Irish American historians have traditionally focused on the urban Irish and their path toward assimilation. The story of the rural Irish of Manitowoc County provides a new interpretation of Irish American history, differing from those centering on the persecuted city Irishman. While most Irish immigrants remained in the cities, a significant number still came to rural states like Wisconsin and took up agriculture as their principal occupation. The Irish in Manitowoc County were reflective of this rural group. The Irish immigrants that settled in Manitowoc County maintained strong ethnic ties through their close proximity, the continuation of ethnic and cultural narratives, and their involvement in churches. Although the rural Irish did experience some assimilation, they also persisted in asserting their ethnic identity. This interplay between assimilation and ethnic assertion provides historians with a new framework for studying Irish Americans: to study the degree to which the Irish both assimilated and asserted their ethnic identity.
Introduction

Most Irish American historians have focused on Irish immigrants in the city—with good reason. Many Irish immigrants came to America with limited resources. Unable to invest immediately in farmland out West, they congregated in larger port cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago. From 1870 to 1900, New York State held the largest number of Irish-born people, followed by Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Illinois (see Table 1).

The emigrants of Eire faced harsh discrimination, largely because of their devotion to Catholicism, and therefore took some of the lowest-regarded jobs. The Irish typically worked in mills, as servants, and building the nation’s transportation infrastructure. Immigration historian Roger Daniels describes the economic position of the Irish: “Whenever Irish and blacks were present in significant numbers, significant competition between them developed, sometimes murderously, as in the draft riots in New York City in July 1863. In the antebellum South it was widely believed that the Irish should be employed in dangerous, high mortality jobs rather than risking the loss of valuable Negro slaves.” Thus many historians of the Irish in America have focused on the story of a persecuted, laboring city population who built the canals and railroads of society only to be regarded slightly better than black slaves.

The persecuted characterization of the Irish was first established by Oscar Handlin in the 1940s and later solidified by Kerby Miller in 1985. Previously, Irish immigration historians had focused on the structural and institutional clashes between Irish immigrants and Americans in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>1870</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1 “Irish Born Persons by State” Historical Census Browser. University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center; <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>; accessed 10/11/07. 1870 is the base year because the aggregate number of Irish-born living in each state is unavailable for previous years. The rank of each state is based on the total number of Irish persons living there from 1870-1900.

2 Roger Daniels, Coming to America 2nd Ed. (New York: Perennial, 2000), 136.
Irish quest toward assimilation. Handlin, however, added the element of pathos to the Irish American story—assimilation, though still their ultimate goal and inevitable destination, became seen as a painful process for the Irish immigrants. In his monograph, *Boston’s Immigrants*, Handlin stressed how the Irish were particularly unwelcome in Boston: “certainly, prospective settlers who could be at all selective would pass Boston by in favor of its younger and relatively more flourishing sisters. For in this community there was no room for strangers; its atmosphere of cultural homogeneity, familiar and comforting to self-contained Bostonians, seemed rigidly forbidding to aliens.”

Since assimilation was the presumed goal of the Irish, Boston’s resistance to bringing in outsiders was particularly painful for the Irish. Kerby Miller took Irish persecution to a new level, labeling the Irish as “exiles” in his 1985 monograph, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*. He states his thesis as “Irish-American homesickness, alienation, and nationalism were rooted ultimately in a traditional Irish Catholic worldview which predisposed Irish emigrants to perceive or at least justify themselves not as voluntary, ambitious emigrants but as involuntary, nonresponsible ‘exiles,’ compelled to leave

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home by forces beyond individual control, particularly by British and landlord oppression.”

Thus the Irish were unwillingly thrust from their homes into an unfamiliar and unwelcoming landscape.

Recent historians have begun to move away from Miller’s characterization of the Irish as “involuntary, nonresponsible exiles.” Roger Daniels comments:

Views of national and ethnic character, even in the hands of a careful scholar like Miller, always run the risk of blending into stereotype. Certainly the cultural baggage that immigrants brought with them can never be ignored and there are observable differences in the collective behavior of American immigrant and ethnic groups. But it seems to many that views like Miller’s go too far. Were he correct, it seems to me, the experiences of the Canadian Irish and the Australian Irish would be more similar to those of the American Irish than they are. He goes on to stress that the interaction between Irish and American culture helped to form a unique Irish American experience. Though most current historians would agree that the Irish were not entirely passive in their American experience, the degree to which Irish Americans were active in developing and maintaining their ethnic identity is an important question in the current stage of Irish American history.

The struggle to maintain ethnic history and identity has been a prominent topic in history. This is especially true since cultural historians were prompted by the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 60s to focus both on the ethnic identities of African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, and other minority groups and on how those groups resisted assimilation. However, historians have failed to thoroughly explore the question of ethnic identity for “white” ethnicities. Russell Kazal investigated the maintenance of German-American identity in his 2004 monograph, Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity. He reviewed both the degree to which German-Americans have identified with their German ancestry as well as

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5 Daniels, Coming to America, 136.
that to which Americans in general have valued German-American identity over the past one hundred-fifty years. He asserts that German Americans have become “old stock,” or as highly regarded as the British who first settled America. Thus, not all ethnicities have striven to resist assimilation, as many cultural historians had asserted for their various groups.

German-American immigration parallels that of the Irish in at least two major respects: both groups arrived in large part during the mid-nineteenth century and then became “old stock” by the mid-twentieth. Irish Americans in the twenty-first century are no longer associated with the canal digging and servitude of the nineteenth century. And while larger society has accepted Irish Americans as “old stock,” many Irish Americans have either abandoned any traditions that would set them apart as identifiably Irish or failed to learn them. Kazal’s exploration of assimilation and multiculturalism is an applicable lens for Irish American history as well. The Irish-American story is much more complex than that of a persecuted people in exile who eventually assimilated into American culture. It is important for historians to ask why Irish Americans have assimilated (or have been assimilated) and to what degree that assimilation has occurred.

**Figure 1. Manitowoc, Wisconsin.**
Image created by the author.

The Irish of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, provide some evidence that Irish identity has not completely disappeared from the American landscape. Whereas nationally, Irish American identity has been reduced to dyed rivers on March 17th and themed bars, Manitowoc County has maintained a rich and prideful history. Many Irish descendents have combined forces to trace their
ancestries, share stories, and keep Irish ethnic identity alive and thriving in Manitowoc County. Prompted by the 150th Anniversary of one Irish community, Maple Grove, the local Irish formed The Friends of Saint Patrick’s, a group that works to preserve that identity. Numerous amateur historians have produced books and compilations of the Irish in the county. So what is it that sets the Irish Americans of Manitowoc County apart that they would be so dedicated to preserving their ethnic identity?

Manitowoc County’s relative isolation, narrative and cultural exchanges, and involvement in churches have allowed the Irish American immigrants and their descendents residing there to maintain and strengthen their Irish identity more so than the typical Irish American community. Farm life was a stronger continuation of the typical Irishman’s life than urban life. The Irish of Manitowoc County maintained connection and communication through churches and close proximity, often married other Irish immigrants, and linked their Irish identity with their American and rural identities, allowing each to reinforce the other and amalgamate into a strong ethnic identity.

Chapter 2

The Irish Exodus: Finding Manitowoc

Leaving Ireland

Although not the entire history, the most well-known story of the Irish in America is their exodus during the Great Famine of the 1840s. Roger Daniels calculates that approximately 4.5 million Irish immigrated to America from 1820 to 1924; while the heaviest years of immigration were during and immediately following the Famine, there were still a significant number of Irish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Immigration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
The two main push factors for Irish emigrants were British oppression and the famine. British rule in Ireland dated back to the eighteenth century, when Britain imposed its governance over the Irish parliament. In 1800, Irish parliament was abolished and Irish citizens became British subjects. The Irish desire for self-governance, coupled with religious conflicts between the Anglican British and the Catholic Irish, created a great deal of resentment toward the British government on the neighboring island. By the time of the potato blight in 1845, the Irish were left to depend on a foreign government for aid—aid which, for the most part, never arrived. This exacerbated any ill will toward the British and helped strengthen reasons for leaving. But even more influential was the lack of opportunities remaining after the famine had struck.

The famine changed the face of Ireland forever. The population of Ireland was approximately 8 million in 1841; during the famine years, over 2 million emigrated (about 1.6 million to the United States) over the next decade and somewhere between 1 and 1.5 million Irish died from hunger and disease. Altogether, Ireland lost almost half of its population due to the famine. The famine also changed Irish culture. David Holmes, historian of the Irish in Wisconsin, describes the new Irish culture as “deeply conservative.” Instead of dividing their plots of land among many sons, parents began bequeathing their land only to the eldest; thus,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1820-1830</td>
<td>54,338</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831-1840</td>
<td>207,381</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841-1850</td>
<td>780,719</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851-1860</td>
<td>914,119</td>
<td>35.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861-1870</td>
<td>435,778</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871-1880</td>
<td>436,871</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881-1890</td>
<td>655,482</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-1900</td>
<td>388,416</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901-1910</td>
<td>339,065</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-1920</td>
<td>146,181</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-1924</td>
<td>71,885</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,578,941</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Number and Percentage of Irish Immigrants to America 1820-1924

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6 Daniels, *Coming to America*, 129. Table 2 also taken from page 129.
8 Daniels, *Coming to America*, 134-35.
younger sons and daughters faced an overwhelming lack of opportunities. Immigrating to America was not only departure for the land of opportunity—it was departure from a homeland of no opportunity.\textsuperscript{10}

Where in America?

Upon arriving in America, the Irish immigrants had to determine where to go. Destitute from the famine, many immigrants were left with few resources for traveling any further west than the port cities. As previously mentioned, the majority of Irish immigrants settled in New York, Boston, and Chicago. In 1870, of the 1,840,396 Irish living in the United States, 48,479, or three percent, lived in Wisconsin.\textsuperscript{11} These nearly fifty thousand individuals (as well as most other Wisconsinites) were concentrated mainly in Milwaukee, but also in the mining towns in Lafayette and Rock Counties in the South (see Figures 2 and 3).

\textsuperscript{10} There are a number of resources dealing directly with the immigration of the Irish. Miller’s monograph is still probably the most current and comprehensive work dealing exclusively with the subject, but see also Reginald Byron’s \textit{Irish America} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) for a sociological perspective and R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams’ \textit{The Great Famine} (Dublin: Lilliput Press Ltd, 1994) for an Irish perspective on the subject.

Figure 2. Wisconsin Counties in 1870: People Born in Ireland

Figure 3. Wisconsin Counties in 1870: Total Population
Many of the Irish were drawn to Wisconsin by advertisements and articles in Eastern newspapers. Grace McDonald, author of the 1976 dissertation *History of the Irish in Wisconsin in the Nineteenth Century*, states that it was common to see the phrase, “Fifty years’ labor in New England or twenty years’ toil in Ohio are not equal in their results to five industrious years in Wisconsin.” In addition to newspapers, the Irish were also encouraged to come by relatives already in the state. Holmes quotes William Shea’s description of how he brought his family into the Fond du Lac area: “I sent for George, George sent for Joe, Joe sent for Mike. My sister Bridget, who is married to Mike Sullivan and lives in Milwaukee, came here when she was about twenty. The folks paid her way over here, because she was going to marry someone over there they didn’t like, so they sent her to America.”

**Why Manitowoc?**

There were a number of reasons Irish immigrants in Wisconsin chose to settle in Manitowoc County. The area encompassing the county was ceded to the United States by the Menominee tribe in 1831. ¹² Ten years later, German immigrants began to settle the county. Ralph Plumb, one of Manitowoc County’s most noted historians, describes the rush of settlers to Manitowoc County in the 1840s: “In 1846 the population of the county had been 629, while in 1847 it was increased to 1285.” ¹³ Manitowoc was most likely an attractive place to settle due to its relative proximity to Milwaukee, the lack of previous settlers (and thus the availability of land), and its location on Lake Michigan (which made transportation and trade much easier). ¹⁴

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¹³ Ralph Plumb. *A History of Manitowoc County*. (Manitowoc, WI: Brandt Print and Binding Co., 1904), 32.

¹⁴ I might sometimes refer to Manitowoc County as “Manitowoc,” specifying the city as “the city of Manitowoc.”
Those settling in Manitowoc in the mid-nineteenth century certainly had to have the drive to explore new lands, or at least the fortitude to clear trees for farmland. Thomas Sheahan, author of *All Those Folks from Saint Patrick’s: The Irish Community of Rural Maple Grove, Wisconsin* (2001) identifies the Irish in Maple Grove as pre-famine immigrants; thus, the Irish in Maple Grove did not flee starvation but rather left their home country in order to explore new opportunities. As Sheahan points out, “The core of the early Maple Grove community was shaped by families with experience in frontier farm life for ten or twenty years before coming to Wisconsin.” This sense of stability and exploration at least sets the Irish of Maple Grove apart from Miller’s pathos-ridden Boston Irish, if not the majority of famine-induced Irish immigrants in general.

Although at least those Irish in Maple Grove came prior to the famine, a significant number of the Irish in Manitowoc County were still representative of the 1840s and 50s Irish immigrant. Of those immigrants who declared their intent for citizenship in Manitowoc County from 1848-1929, the average Irishman was born in 1824, entered the United States in 1850, and declared their intent for citizenship in 1856 (see Charts 1, 2, and 3). While these young men fit the stereotype of the young adult immigrating to a land of opportunity, there is no way of determining whether these young men were married, single, or second sons.

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15 Thomas Sheahan, *All Those Folks from Saint Patrick’s: The Irish Community of Rural Maple Grove, Wisconsin* (Reedsdale, WI: Friends of Saint Patrick’s, 2001), 27.
The Irish of Manitowoc County were most likely a mixture of the many groups emigrating from Ireland in the nineteenth century. While the residents of Maple Grove represent the early wave of immigration, there were a significant number of Irish in Manitowoc who came during and immediately after the famine years. The one thing that significantly sets the Irish of Manitowoc County apart from other Irish American immigrants is what they did when they arrived; for the most part, the Manitowoc County Irish farmed.

Chapter 3
In Manitowoc: What to Do, Where to Go

Farming in Manitowoc County

Farming has always been an integral aspect of life in Manitowoc County. The county approximately 70 miles North of Milwaukee is largely rural; of the seventy-two Wisconsin
counties, Manitowoc ranks twenty-first in the percentage of land it devotes to farms (see Table 3). In 2004, approximately five percent of those employed in Manitowoc County were employed in farming, compared to approximately three percent statewide. Historically, Manitowoc County has been a farming county as well.

When immigrants first arrived in Manitowoc, farming was one of the settlers’ main focuses. Louis Falge, the other noted Manitowoc County historian, describes the county’s shift to farming in the nineteenth century: “Up to 1847, the principal means of livelihood of the settlers was cutting trees, the manufacture of lumber and catching fish for the eastern markets. The attention of incoming settlers at this time, however, was drawn toward the land with the desire to cultivate…"

### Table 3. Percentage of Land Devoted to Farming in 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wisconsin County</th>
<th>Percentage Devoted to Farm Land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Lafayette</td>
<td>83.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Grant</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Green</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rock</td>
<td>76.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Iowa</td>
<td>75.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Kewaunee</td>
<td>73.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Pierce</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Trempealeau</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Buffalo</td>
<td>70.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Fond du Lac</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Calumet</td>
<td>70.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Pepin</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Dodge</td>
<td>69.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Jefferson</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Dunn</td>
<td>67.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Vernon</td>
<td>67.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. St. Croix</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Dane</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Columbia</td>
<td>65.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Manitowoc</td>
<td>64.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…</td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. Wisconsin Total</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…</td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69. Milwaukee</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70. Forest</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71. Iron</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72. Vilas</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73. Menominee</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

it and make it produce the corn, wheat, oats and other cereals it was so abundantly capable of doing.” Thus when the Irish (along with the Germans and Norwegians) came to the county, its residents began to shift toward farming.

Historians have debated the degree to which the Irish were farmers. Holmes states that nationwide, “about 85 percent of Irish American Catholics worked in industry or in the transportation sector (usually the railroad), and only 15 percent were engaged in farming. This is odd considering the agricultural nature of their life back in Ireland. But despite their rural lifestyle in Ireland, many of the Irish were not well versed in modern farming techniques and they had little experience managing their own farms.”

Robert Nesbit, the preeminent Wisconsin historian, describes Irish immigrants as such:

Unlike the German and Norwegian, the Irish peasant did not yearn to get on the land and make a piece of American soil his own. Although many of the Irish did turn to farming, they shared the Yankee readiness to move on if the price were right or a move seemed to offer something better. They did not consciously settle in separate ethnic communities as did the Germans and Norwegians, but in an urban setting they were often ghettoized by their poverty. In any town that had been a center of construction work such as a plank road, canal, or railroad, the Irish were to be found, and many sought an urban setting where the church could reach them.

While it is true that, across the nation, most Irish did not take up farming, it is also true that most Irish in Wisconsin did. “The goal was land ownership, as it was for nearly every immigrant coming from a land-poor homeland. In 1850, Irish born farmers in Wisconsin numbered 4400; by 1860 there were 12,900 … More Irishmen were engaged in agriculture than in any other

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industry.”21 Thus the farming communities in Manitowoc represent the primary occupation of most Irish immigrants throughout the state of Wisconsin.

**Irish Settlements in Manitowoc County**

The Irish in Manitowoc County settled into farming communities. They mainly congregated in the townships of Franklin, Cato, Maple Grove, and Liberty—each of which were heavily populated with farmers (see Chart 4, Figure 4).22 Falge describes the Irish involvement in Manitowoc County:

> Many of the intrepid and hardy sons of the Emerald Isle took up their abode in the county and joined their fortunes with that of the community. A large number of the best element of the Irish race, immigrating from “the land of the shamrock so green” entered or bought land here in the ‘40s and stood on a par with those who came before them in industry and good deportment. They, of course, also prospered and Maple Grove, Rockland, Cato, Memee, Liberty and Franklin are largely indebted to them for their coming so early in their history and developing the land into well cultivated farms. 23

Other than recognizing a few notable Irishmen from the county, the only other remark Falge reserves for the Irish is “All were welcomed and all ‘made good.’”24 Thus the Irish were primarily recognizable for their involvement with and contributions to agriculture.

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21 Sylvia Hall ed. *Farewell to the Homeland: European Immigration to N.E. Wisconsin 1840 to 1900*. 2nd ed. (Published for The Heritage Festival: Brown County Historical Society, 1984), 88. Manitowoc County Historical Society.

22 This data has been calculated by taking the surnames of Irish immigrants who declared their intent for citizenship in Manitowoc County and cross referencing those names with the Plat Map indices to determine the concentration of where Irish immigrants lived. This only accounts for roughly one third of the Irish immigrants (particularly omitting those who did not declare citizenship in Manitowoc County), but it does provide a rough idea of where the Irish were settling.


24 Ibid, 40.
Figure 4. Townships of Manitowoc County. Image from <www.2manitowoc.com>. 

Chart 4. Distribution of Irish in Manitowoc County by Township.
Chapter 4
Maintaining Ties

The communities established by Irish Americans in Manitowoc County are recognizable both physically (geographically and visually) and thematically through narratives. Churches were an additional marker that helped identify Irish communities; most rural communities centered on a church and partially defined themselves by it. Thus, physical location, common cultural stories and experiences, and ties to local churches helped to solidify and strengthen the ties present in Irish American rural Manitowoc County.

On the Map

Someone riding horseback through Manitowoc County in the 1800s would have been able to tell when they reached an Irish community. The villages of Maple Grove and Osman within the townships of Maple Grove and Memee, respectively, are two of the most widely known Irish communities in the county. In Maple Grove, the Irish settled most heavily in sections 1, 2, 3, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 23, and 24—essentially the northeast corner of the township, including the area where the post office resided in 1878 (see Figure 5). In Memee, the Irish settled in sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 14, 21, 22, and 28—likewise, the northeastern part of the township (see Figure 6). Rockland’s Irish congregated in the southeast, Newton’s in the southwest, Liberty’s in the southeast, Franklin’s in the western half, and Eaton’s in the north.\footnote{This information was determined by cross referencing the Irish names listed on the Declarations of Intent for Manitowoc County with the Plat Map indices for 1872, 1878, and 1893.} Very few Irish farms were scattered amongst the Germans and Norwegians—most Irish farmers lived near other Irish farms in order to maintain strong ethnic ties.
Even without a Plat map handy or an ear for Irish brogue, the observant rider could have identified an Irish farm. Manitowoc Irishman Jim Smith described the difference between Irish and German farms:

German farms were organized; the accent was on the barns, which were large and well painted. The German wives would only have two dresses to wear and there would be a new tractor in the barn. Irish farms were smaller, disorganized in some cases, and were much more diversified. The Irish raised half a dozen different kinds of crops; they didn’t like to be locked into being out in the barn late or early—I always say, Irish farmers never needed lights in their barns. And the Irish wives had many types of dresses and were much more involved in social activities than German wives.26

Geraldine Barnes remembered that Irish farms had “a lot of buildings, as many as eleven, on their farms. There was the blacksmith, the building where they kept their ice, the chicken coop, the summer kitchen, and the place they kept all their things—none of these buildings were attached to each other.”27 In addition having unique farms, the Irish farmers themselves were quite distinctive. Geraldine Barnes remembers them as “hard workers and very conservative. But

26 Jim Smith, “The Irish of Manitowoc County,” interview by author, Manitowoc, WI, 9/7/07.
the Irish always ate good, even when we couldn’t afford to. There were always steaks and two types of pies to choose from.”  

Irish farms were often clustered together throughout the county and were operated in a manner that set them apart from the local German farms.

Local Narratives

The local Irish and some historians have captured a few of the stories of Maple Grove and Osman. All of these stories stress the rural, Irish identity shared by the residents of Maple Grove and Osman. The storytellers’ emphases demonstrate the importance of Irish ethnicity and farm life in shaping the memories and experiences of the Irish Americans in Manitowoc County.

In 1992, Jo Ann Wall compiled *A Wee Bit of Irish*, a collection of poems, memories, and newspaper clippings, “for the Come Home to Maple Grove Celebration, July 5, 1992, Maple Grove-Manitowoc County, Wisconsin.” Margaret Friedland contributed many of the poems; one which incorporates many rich details of Irish rural life is titled “An Irish Yesterday.”

“An Irish Yesterday”  
Margaret Friedland

I remember yesterday  
Of black plowed earth and new mown hay  
Of thrashing grain and falling rain  
Of haystacks high and rainbow sky  
A farmhouse old and weather-worn  
Where a clan of ten was bred and born  
Walking to a one-room school  
Playing tag and April Fool  
St. Patrick’s School and Sisters stern  
A slap to remind: “You are here to learn”  
Maple Grove, a farming place  
Everyone Irish: shanty and lace  
A windmill blowing in the breeze  
Potato fields and apple trees  
A big fat moon on Halloween  
Playing tricks and being mean  
Miss O’Hearn and Marquette School

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Learning math and the Golden Rule
Wearing dresses slightly worn
Eating oatmeal every morn
A Saturday bath and clean underwear
That had frozen and dried in the cold winter air
A sleigh ride on a frosty day
Horses puffing all the way
A Model-T that wouldn’t go
Stuck in a snowbank at 20 below
A churchbell ringing out at noon
Emptying out the town saloon
Great Aunt Bridget, 95, and still not dead
“I’ll bury the lot o’ ye” she yelled from her bed
A pot bellied stove that kept us warm
Mama’s prayers in a thunderstorm
Santa’s tidings on Xmas Eve:
“Tis better to give than to receive”
Aunt Nellie and Aunt Bessie, both home in Heaven
Whose love and good deeds
Measured seven times seven times seven
Yes, I remember yesterday
It doesn’t seem that far away
But now it’s in the Golden Past
And I am growing old—but fast!!

Friedland’s poem immediately paints the farm landscape in Maple Grove, identifies St. Patrick’s School, the Catholic presence, and the importance of family and community ties. Though the poem is a compilation of her memories, she titled it “An Irish Yesterday,” implying that any Irish person could have these same memories. Interestingly, she did not entitle the poem “A Rural Yesterday” or “An American Yesterday”—her ethnic identity was so integral to her memories that it became the title for the poem.

In 2000, the Town of Maple Grove Sesquicentennial History Committee commissioned a history of the town of Maple Grove. Though the manuscript focuses on the entire township—not just Irish Maple Grove—it still provides some history as well as some anecdotes for the Irish community. Thomas Morrissey is identified as “one of the first Irishmen to settle in Maple Grove in 1850. He soon after started a small store and saloon which is now on the corner of County
Trunk G and Hillcrest Road, north of Maple Grove.”30 The settlers had to clear the land before starting farms, but decades later, dairy farming became the primary form of agriculture. By 1872, the railroad had passed through the township. In 1905, Maple Grove had free mail delivery, phones were installed six years later, and by 1920, power and electricity had reached Maple Grove. In the Irish village of Maple Grove, community members had purchased land for a church and cemetery by 1858, the cornerstone for which was laid November 1, 1868. The village quickly began to grow. JP Sheahan established a small store in 1870, Michael Buckley instituted a town tavern and dance hall in 1887, and from 1909 to 1912, there were plans to build a school. The village was also establishing itself within the larger township and surrounding area. In the early twentieth century, Maple Grove put itself on the map with a tournament-winning baseball team: “If a person lived in or near Maple Grove in the years 1910–1911 he or she would perhaps remember the Maple Grove Shamrocks. … Fame was established during the years when the Maple Grove Shamrocks baseball team won the Manitowoc County championship. The team won 26 out of 27 games.

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30 History of the Town of Maple Grove, Manitowoc County, WI, Henrietta Mack, ed. (Town of Maple Grove Sesquicentennial History Committee 1850-2000, 2000), 4. Manitowoc County Historical Society. The small store and saloon are no longer there.
Defeated teams could not figure out how the Maple Grove farmers could play such good baseball” (see Figure 7). Although many of these institutions have vanished (the store, the dance hall, the baseball team), they were fundamental in uniting the various farmers of the area and maintaining community ties.

The most recent local work to focus on the Irish of Maple Grove is Thomas Sheahan’s *All Those Folks from Saint Patrick’s: The Irish Community of Rural Maple Grove, Wisconsin* (2001). In one “scene” of Maple Grove, Sheahan quotes Mrs. O’Hearn’s statements from a Manitowoc County Historical Society newsletter: “When asked about the Irish wakes, Mrs. O’Hearn vividly recalled them. ‘Oh, yes,’ she said. ‘They were quite renowned. After all, it was the last party they [sic] deceased would host. During the two night vigil, there certainly was no dearth of conversation. Many of those participating had traveled a far distance, so friends and relatives had a lot of talking to do to catch up on all the news.’” Mrs. O’Hearn’s memory is one quite vivid to many who have recalled the Irish. Geraldine Barnes remembered the Irish wake: “the only time the living room was ever heated was for a wake and Christmas. They’d take the corpse, set him in the corner, and then toast the body.” John Mullins described them as “big family reunions. They lasted a while—no one ever just went home. They were all day events—like a picnic. The wakes were always segregated; the men would go off in one room and talk

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31 Ibid, 64. The picture is taken from page 65 of the manuscript.
32 Sheahan, although a resident of Red Bank, New Jersey, decided to write a history of Maple Grove to provide his grandchildren with a family history. In addition, he states, “they needed to know about the courage, daring, determination, persistence, and ‘can do’ attitude that characterized their Irish forebears. Grandchildren need to know the strength that they have inherited from generations of survivors with lots of ‘get up and go’ spirit. They need to know about strong women. These children need to know why being an Irish Catholic was and is different.” (p2). He describes different aspects of life in Maple Grove, from school to politics to economics, interjects various stories from obituaries, interviews, and newspapers, and includes some of the notable Irish who have emerged from Manitowoc County.
33 Sheahan, *All Those Folks from Saint Patrick’s*, 93.
politics.” Jim Smith added, “During the wake, they would pass the bottle and you had to say something good about the deceased for the bottle to be passed to you.” Even though the Irish wake is no longer practiced in America, the wakes embodied the religious, familial, and fun-loving spirit that people still associate with the Irish.

The Irish are famous (or possibly infamous) for their embrasure of both religion and alcohol. John Mullins commented that the Irish were “always considered rowdy and religious. They would drink all day Saturday, then go to Church all day Sunday.” Sister Jane Doolan remembered the Irish character in her school janitor, Mike Watt:

Uncle Mike Watt was the custodian, janitor if you will, of St. Patrick’s Church, school and the Pastor’s and Sisters’ Home. He was a kind old gentleman whom the children dearly loved because he’d cater to their needs, tease them, or he gave them an occasional treat. Each morning and evening he’d ring the Angelus bell, and if by chance, any of the Doolan children happened to see him on his way to church, they’d be right on his heels. Inside, Uncle Mike Watt always insisted on reverence and quiet while awaiting the time for the Angelus. After the triple bells were rung and the larger bell was ringing full swing, he’d allow the children to grab the ropes and to swing up to the ceiling. Coming down each of us would take his or her turn, but we always had several swings. At any rate it was so much fun!

While Mike Watt always insisted on reverence while waiting for the Angelus, he was also entertaining the local children with treats and bell ringing.

A similar account of Osman’s Irish is in the Manitowoc County Historical Society Newsletter article, “Osman—The Heart of ‘Irish Meeme’.” Reverend Father Francis D. Rose of Saint Isadore’s Parish in Osman described the history of Memee and then included a few local legends.

At the annual meeting on March 17, 1877, the members of the Total Abstinence Society voted to build a Hall. The site east of the school was donated by James Peppard, and a hall 30 x 50 feet was built. Known as Temperance Hall, it was for many years the scene of interesting and exciting meetings, gatherings and celebrations especially the Annual St. Patrick Day observance when the dispensation from the observance of the pledge was freely granted. A story has it

38 Jo Ann Wall, A Wee Bit of Irish. (1992), Manitowoc County Historical Society.
that one of the members approached the president in an inebriated condition and asked if he could take the pledge. Father asked him “For how long do you want to take the pledge?” to which he replied “I usually take it for life, Father!”

Stories of the Irish often contain some reference to alcohol. Geraldine Barnes recalled, “In Osman, the church was on one side of the road and the tavern on the other. Sunday mornings, the men would be in the tavern and the women in Church. Sometimes the priest would have to go in and tell the men that Mass was starting. After Church, of course, the men would go back to ‘socializing’ at the tavern.” The Irish were both devout in their religion and enthusiastic about their drinking. Both of these were communal activities that helped link the rural farmers and strengthen ethnic ties.

Gender differences were marked in rural Irish life. Geraldine Barnes’ recollection of men congregating in the tavern while women met in the Church is just one example of gender differences. John Mullins described Irish women as “domesticated slaves;” “they were told to stay still. They were all educated, rural teachers—through the county Normal system, though, not the university. The women were told to be quiet and raise the kids, rather than making a living going to college.” Irish women might have been inclined to laugh off this harsh characterization, however. Geraldine Barnes remembers that the Irish women were “more easy going and laid back. They also had a sense of humor. The women were very obedient to their husbands, letting their men do what they wanted to do. They would do all the work, then sit and visit while the men went off to the tavern.” Thomas Sheahan also characterized Irish women as “strong.” While rural Irish women operated within the domestic sphere expected of all women

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43 Sheahan, All those folks from Saint Patrick’s, 2.
in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, they also set themselves apart as strong, hard-working, and tolerant human beings.\footnote{44}

The Irish are also often remembered for their involvement in politics. John Mullins recalls that “The Irish were always involved—always into the opposite side of the prevailing government and always troublemakers; the Irish would move into a German community and soon the Irish were running it.”\footnote{45} Jim Smith added that the “Irish would get up in the morning and listen to politics—you could not talk during the news.”\footnote{46} The Irish were commonly recognized as “bloc voters,” promising their vote as a demographic to the candidate or party who would best serve the Irish community, which, in the Maple Grove community from 1857-1900, was the Democrats.\footnote{47}

The Irish affiliation with the Democratic Party was especially evident during the Civil War. Thomas Sheahan notes that “During the Civil War, most Irish voters in Maple Grove struggled with their new farms, fathered children every two years and avoided the war as much as possible . . . most preferred to take care of their own children and their cows.”\footnote{48} He cites the key political issue “not [as] freeing the slaves but rather freeing the Irish from English rule.”\footnote{49} Laurie Shawhan has found, however, that the Irish were quite active in the Civil War; she recalled that “all were involved in the Civil War one way or another.”\footnote{50} Her family history, “The Irish Offering,” chronicles the deep involvement of her Irish ancestors in Manitowoc County and

\footnote{44 Hasia Diner, author of *Erin’s Daughters in America* (1983), has produced the most thorough study of Irish American women. She describes how, because the Irish was the only significant ethnic group to have more women (especially single women) migrate than men, Irish women had a unique experience immigrating to the United States. Diner characterizes the choice to immigrate in itself as “liberating” (140). The immigration experience of Irish women helps to explain their strength and independence, as does the limiting experience they were emigrating from. Much of Diner’s monograph focuses on the experience of urban women; this understanding of a unique immigration experience has yet to be applied to rural Irish women.}

\footnote{45 John Mullins, “The Irish of Manitowoc County,” interviewed by author, Manitowoc, WI, 9/21/2007.}

\footnote{46 Jim Smith, “The Irish of Manitowoc County,” interviewed by author, Manitowoc, WI, 9/21/2007.}

\footnote{47 Sheahan, *All those folks from Saint Patrick’s*, 65.}

\footnote{48 Sheahan, *All those folks from Saint Patrick’s*, 69.}

\footnote{49 Sheahan, *All those folks from Saint Patrick’s*, 70.}

\footnote{50 Laurie Shawhan, “The Irish of Manitowoc County” interviewed by author, Manitowoc, WI, 9/28/2007.}
Massachusetts in the Civil War. While the Irish of Maple Grove might not have been volunteering to fight in the Civil War, many Irishmen across the nation did. It is quite possible that the Irishmen in Maple Grove had developed such a strong ethnic identity that they did not feel that the Civil War was relevant to their lives.

Churches

In addition to establishing a unique ethnic identity with local histories and narratives, the Irish in Manitowoc County maintained strong ties through the Church. After the Famine, religious devotion significantly increased among the Irish Catholics. The Irish living in Manitowoc County were from this line of devout Catholics. Establishing and maintaining their own church was especially important to Manitowoc County Irish because they wanted English-speaking churches, not the German-speaking churches that were already present. One instance of this conflict was exemplified in the establishment of Sacred Heart Parish in the city of Manitowoc. The Irish, who lived on the north side of Manitowoc, wanted an English-speaking alternative to the German St. Boniface on the South side. Though the Sacred Heart Parish history of the Congregation sums up the controversy by stating, “Sacred Heart Parish was started under much difficulty and after prolonged agitation,” the difficulty was much more prolonged than one sentence would suggest.\textsuperscript{51} The north side Catholics had invested a great deal in the construction of St. Boniface Church, but it was largely used by the Germans on the south side. It took nearly twenty years for the diocese to approve building a second church, the one that ultimately became Sacred Heart Parish.\textsuperscript{52} The Irish recognized the importance of attending a church reflective of their language and culture. And unlike Nesbit’s assertion that “many [Irish] sought an urban

\textsuperscript{51}“History of Sacred Heart Congregation” (Manitowoc, WI, 1952), 16. Manitowoc County Historical Center.

\textsuperscript{52}Jim Smith, “The Irish of Manitowoc County” interviewed by author, Manitowoc, WI, 9/7/2007.
setting where the church could reach them,” the Irish were maintaining their location and demanding that the Church come to them.

The Irish in Maple Grove were similarly proactive in their efforts to maintain their religion. Before Saint Patrick’s was built in 1870, priests would either travel through the area en route to Milwaukee or Green Bay or community members would travel to nearby parishes in Manitowoc Rapids or Cooperstown for Mass. Once the church was built, Saint Patrick’s became a center for those as far away as Brown and Calumet counties. The church was an important enough icon both for Margaret Friedland to remember it in her poem and for Sheahan to include it in the title of his manuscript. Actively participating in Catholicism is one way that the Irish differentiated and identified themselves in America; the Irish of Manitowoc County’s concerted effort to establish and maintain this differentiation is exemplary of the rural Irish American attitude toward assimilation in general.

Even though Saint Patrick’s Church has undergone some significant changes, the Irish are still strongly tied to the church. Saint Patrick’s is no longer used in Roman Catholic services—any non-Roman Catholic may reserve a wedding ceremony at the church, but the building is no longer recognized by the Green Bay Diocese as being Roman Catholic. A heritage center operated by The Friends of Saint Patrick’s occupies the building next to the church. The graveyard is still intact and the Friends of Saint Patrick’s has recently added a number of maple trees to the site (see Figures 8, 9, and 10).

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54 Sheahan, All those folks from Saint Patrick’s, 36.
Despite the dormant status of the church, many Irish Catholics and non-Catholics alike still congregate at the Friends of Saint Patrick’s organizations to strengthen and maintain their Irish ties in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 5

Conclusion:

What it Means to be Irish

The Friends of Saint Patrick’s is probably the most organized and active group working to maintain Irish ethnic identity in Manitowoc County today. The group works to construct and research the genealogy of its members, publishes a semi-annual newsletter, and holds quarterly
meetings. Their stated mission is to “help maintain the heritage and traditions of the St. Patrick’s Church, and the Maple Grove Area.” But its membership is more extensive than simply the Irish remaining in Maple Grove. Thomas Sheahan, a resident of New Jersey, is a member; Laurie Shawhan, only 25 percent Irish and non-Catholic, belongs to the group; John Mullins, a resident of the city of Manitowoc who has never lived on a farm, is also a member. The group members are not all over the age of sixty—families and children are prevalent at the picnics and meetings. The members of The Friends of Saint Patrick are a diverse group dedicated to the preservation of Irish history and culture.

This diversity is further reflected in some of the local Irish historians. Laurie Shawhan wrote a manuscript focusing on her Irish grandmother, Elizabeth Fitzgerald. In it, she discusses broader Irish history as well as her specific genealogy. Her Mormon faith and its emphasis on strong family ties helped fuel her passion for family history; she stated, “We’re taught that families are forever. It behooves us to find out about our backgrounds.”55 Jim Smith, who has recently been researching churches and ethnic interaction in Manitowoc County, was born in Iowa. Though his distant ancestors came from the Emerald Isle, he has no blood ties to the county to which he dedicates so much time and research.

The definition of “Irish-American” has changed over the past century and a half. It is no longer possible to identify an Irish farm at first site, attend an Irish wake, or go to the same churches as early Irish settlers. Members of a local Irish American heritage group aren’t required to be rural, local, or even majority Irish. Over the past 150 years, much of the “Irish” in Irish American has disappeared—has assimilated into the “American.” But no matter whom the interested parties are, no matter how little they can relate to the nineteenth century Irish American, there is a renewed interest in Irish American culture and ethnicity. The rural Irish of

Manitowoc County especially have asserted their ethnic identity through their geographic isolation, continued narratives, and involvement in churches.

Joann Mullins characterized the Irish as “still very strong as a group. They never forgot who they were.” Jim Smith made Edward O’Donnell’s *1001 Things Everyone Should Know about Irish American History* required reading for each of his sons. And four times each year, a diverse group of Irish American men, women, and children meet in Maple Grove, Wisconsin to assert and explore their Irish roots. This assertion of Irish identity in a pluralistic society embodies the true Irish-American experience: Irish immigrants came to the United States maintaining strong traditions and ethnic ties while concurrently adopting new practices and ideologies in order to fit into American society. They persevered through famine, oppression, and discrimination with their faith and fun-loving spirit; today, the Irish in America maintain many of the same characteristics as their immigrant ancestors. These characteristics were easiest to maintain in close-knit rural communities; however, the ability to maintain ethnic identity is not limited to those who grew up on an Irish American farm. Irish Americans have created a new identity, merging aspects of Irish culture and heritage with those of American culture and heritage. This identity is not defined simply by assimilation or resistance, but rather by tradition, unity, compromise, and adaptation.

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