

EVERYONE'S PARADE

By Fred Hobbs

"I Love a Parade" is a George Gershwin favorite song from early Broadway. Almost everyone, in fact, does enjoy a parade, preferably with bands, floats, colorful costumes and the obligatory grand marshal and/or parade queen. Parades honor holidays, historic events, significant sports victories, celebrity achievements and ethnic pride.

In that last category, one stands out. On or about March 17th, it seems that everyone is Irish, "wearing the green." St. Patrick's Day parades are held in cities large and small all over the U.S., and several other countries including, of course, Ireland. The parades themselves take many forms, some spectacular, others bordering on bizarre.

By far the largest St. Patty's Parade is in New York City. Typically 150,000 celebrants take part, some playing in one of the many bands. Marchers include firefighters, military units, immigrant groups, young and not-so-young, parading in front of an estimated two million spectators every year. By contrast, the smallest parade is believed to take place yearly in the small town of Enterprise, Alabama. One person (preferably of Irish descent) holds an Irish flag above his or her head, carries a pot of gold (or an acceptable facsimile) all the while marching around outside the local courthouse reciting limericks from the "auld sod."

The town of Hot Springs, Arkansas lays claim to the world's shortest march in honor of the saint who banished snakes from Ireland. That St. Patty's parade which takes place on historic Bridge Street in that city, is less than a block long.

Though spring showers and possibly even snow can occasionally dampen spirits on St. Patrick's Day in some places (including Denver), weather conditions don't bother the hearty Irish descendants who live in Alaska. They follow a brisk march with the staging of the Bering Sea St. Patrick's Golf Classic on a six hole ice-covered course played with orange golf balls.

Considered by many the worst St. Pat's parade actually happened ironically in Chicago, a city with a large Irish-American population. Because of windy and wild weather on the scheduled day, Chicago's Southside St. Patrick's Day Parade was actually moved indoors. The owner of the "Irish Eyes" Pub set up a march route starting and ending on the south side of the bar, with ample opportunity for participants to enjoy a pint or more of Guinness along the way. It was not noted how many times the marchers circled the bar or how long the "parade" lasted.

Perhaps the most unusual American celebration of the holiday occurs in San Antonio, Texas. Celebrants board barges (literally floats) at the riverfront in the annual Water Parade featuring the "Wild Geese Irish Soldiers", named after a contingent that fled Ireland following their defeat in the Battle of Boyne in 1690. That was a skirmish over the question of who was the rightful King of England, one of the many disputes between Ireland and the British hierarchy over the centuries. Like wild geese, these Irish soldiers who came to Texas hoped one day to return to the Emerald Isle.

By now, though, they seem content, as proud Irish-Americans, to participate in what has come to embrace virtually the whole nation as "Everyone's Parade."