

The History of The United Irish Counties Association of New York, Inc.

By John T. Ridge

Irish county organizations were first organized in New York City in the late 1840s. The early societies were for the most part purely social organizations, but in the 1870s, some began to offer benefits for sickness and death.

In the 1880s, inspired by the land reform movement in Ireland, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_Land_Acts) more county societies were organized. Eviction and high rents in Ireland were fought on a local basis in Ireland. In New York, a county society, rather than one of the Irish fraternal or social organizations, seemed best able to respond to sudden developments in the old country by focusing fund raising efforts to its own county in Ireland.

In the early 1890s, the first attempt was made to establish a central body to coordinate the Irish counties. A central organization for county societies was formed in Manhattan. At the same time, a second, similar coordinating body was formed in Brooklyn, where many county organizations existed independently. Both these overseeing bodies were similar in design to the present day United Irish Counties. After only a few years of work, these two central organizations went out of existence, although many of the county societies survived.

At the turn of the 20th century, county societies were largely independent of one another and there was only occasional cooperation among them. Neighboring counties did attract immigrants to each other's social functions since the immigrants from border areas often had more in common with one another than did people from the other side of the county. Delegations from neighboring counties were often present at picnics, excursions and dances.

Occasionally, two or more county organizations cooperated in fundraising for a specific regional project in Ireland. Irish dioceses often covered more than one county. And fund-raising for church buildings and institutions commonly involved the cooperation of more than one New York Irish county organization. Visiting Irish politicians often had constituencies that transcended county borders and their pursuit of electioneering money in the city involved the active support of more than one county group.

Local charitable projects could also involve more than one county and in this case geography had little to do with getting them to work together. Donegal could work just as well with Kerry as they could with Tyrone and Dublin could combine forces with Mayo as they could with County Meath.

By 1900, county societies in the NYC were growing rapidly and several of them, like Cork and Kerry, hovered around the five-hundred-member mark. Counties that had comparatively fewer immigrants in the city, particularly some of the smaller Leinster counties organized for the first time or established themselves on a firmer basis.

Suddenly, it became apparent that at long last, organizations existed in Manhattan for almost all of Ireland's 32 counties. While the old Irish fraternal societies like the Ancient Order of Hibernians had long dominated Irish life in the city, a new factor emerged in the upcoming county societies.

The compact Irish neighborhoods that had produced strong Hibernian divisions, especially those below 42nd Street, were vanishing. And with them, many of the long established and neighborhood based A.O.H. divisions. The county societies, drawing their membership from all of Manhattan and sometimes beyond, helped fill the vacuum created by the demise of the older Irish groups.

THE IRISH AMERICAN ATHLETIC UNION

One of the obvious signs of the sudden growth of the county societies after 1900 was the organization of football and hurling teams named after counties rather than the old patriotic names generally long associated with New York's Gaelic sports teams.

Whereas teams invoking the names of Irish patriots like the Emmets, the Meaghers, the Mitchels, the Kickhams and the O'Connells had been the only type of team playing in the city, new teams emerged representing many of Ireland's counties. In some cases, the older teams, which in some cases were almost entirely composed of immigrants from a single county, simply transformed themselves into county teams. The Kickhams became the Tipperary team and the O'Connells became the Kerry team.

By 1904, there were more than a dozen county named teams and the number seemed to grow every week. In a short time, virtually all the teams playing football or hurling would be affiliated with a county organization and, consequently, a central body was needed to coordinate them. A few individuals in the Co. Kilkenny organization, which had both hurling and football teams, were generally credited with being the initiators of the movement to form a central governing organization to promote Gaelic games among the counties.

The initial organizing meeting was held in Grace's Hall, East 25th Street and First Avenue, on June 21st, 1904. Although all county organizations were invited, addresses for the officers were not available for every society. Nevertheless, delegations from a dozen or so counties answered the following call:

"The object is to form a council or board of directors to regulate athletic games and Gaelic pastimes between the different societies at their annual picnics. This council or board will consist of representatives from every county in Ireland to govern and develop Irish athletic sports. All counties

who can possibly attend this meeting are urged to do so. The council or board will receive its name at this meeting and officers for the ensuing year will be elected. M.F. Dowling, Temporary Secretary"

The officers chosen at the meeting included: President, Luke J. Finn, Vice President, P. Costelloe, Treasurer, Martin Phillips and Secretary, M. F. Dowling.

A committee was then chosen to draw up a set of rules to govern the new organization.

On July 9th, a meeting was held at a new location: McGarry's Hall, East 32nd Street and Lexington Avenue. Fourteen county societies were present: Kilkenny, Sligo, Galway, Mayo, Roscommon, Dublin, Longford, Cork, Tipperary, Kerry, Waterford, Cavan, Westmeath and Monaghan.

President Luke J. Finn, a former head of the Co. Sligo Men's Association, told the delegates that earlier movements to unite the counties had not succeeded because they had "not been conducted in the right spirit," but in this new organization "every county would have an equal voice." For men who had been denied the right to rule themselves at home in Ireland, the new association was in miniature a kind of dream come true.

Finn addressed the delegates who were aware that they were taking an important step:

"At our last meeting, we had men from nearly every county in Ireland and this alone is an encouraging feature of the new association. It is not only this, but you will hear the voice of Ireland concentrated in one little room. Men from the North will meet the South; men from the East will meet the West, and a fact which will be set down in the history, reminding us of our glorious days when our gallant forefathers met in conference on the hills of Tara. In fact, the good that this association has before it to do can only be anticipated at present; it is not organized merely for sporting purposes alone, but to bring more closely together the Irish people on this side of the Atlantic to defend and uphold that which we are too often denied."

THE COUNTIES IN SPORT

A name for the new organization, the Irish Counties Athletic Union, was agreed upon by the middle of July 1904, but there is evidence that the society began to be called the United Irish Counties as early as 1907. One of the first problems to be addressed for the I.C.A.U. was the attempt to get the county teams to confine themselves to the members of their association or at least to the county to which they belonged.

It had come to pass that no regard was paid to the colors of the team; "men from Kerry were co-opted in the County Down team and Tipperary men distinguished themselves in the football game with the team from County

Derry." Since so much of the competitive edge came from the sense of local pride in each of the county teams, it was felt that if this practice was to get out of hand "pride and place of locality would be taken out of it." The enforcement of this rule was to cause some friction among the societies and a typical example of the reaction of individual counties came in March, 1906, when Galway reacted to an official violation for non-county men on its team:

"The 2nd article of the Constitution of the Galway Men's Social and Benevolent Association provides and states that any Irishman or son of an Irishman is eligible to membership providing that he resided in Galway for a term of five years. It is a matter of no consequence to us whether a man was born in Timbuktu or is a native of Uganda as long as he fulfills the aforesaid conditions and is in good standing in the Galway Men's Association. The Irish Counties Athletic Association cannot disqualify him from playing under the colors of his organization."

Just how serious the new organization was about governing sport was evident in the first public activity of the new Irish Counties Athletic Association, a "Tournament," that was held in Celtic Park in Sunnyside, Queens, on October 9, 1904. Its official notices stressed clearly that "I.C.A.U. rules apply." It was the boast of the I.C.A.U. that its organization had not cost any of the county societies a single penny. However, to continue, funds were needed, and the I.C.A.U. proposed to meet those obligations by raising its own money.

Several county Gaelic games were on the program as well as running and jumping contests. Participants in these athletic events did not need to be member of a Gaelic team to be eligible; but had to be a member of a county society.

Although the event was held at Celtic Park there was a love/hate relationship between the I.C.A.U. and the park. Celtic Park had been founded in 1897 by a group of individuals, many of whom were leaders in Irish societies. These individuals invested money to buy a piece of waste ground across the river from Manhattan for Irish sports. It was a business first and foremost even though the park was fondly looked upon by the Irish community as the place to be on any given Sunday. The park was run for profit and only the best, and consequently crowd drawing, football and hurling clubs were given the most attractive dates for their games. The clubs that had the largest following were perfectly comfortable with this condition, but new teams, and particularly those that were from the smaller counties were out of luck. If they got any date for their game or their county field day it was liable to be at a very unfavorable time of year when the draw would often be no bigger than a "corporal's guard."

After the formation of the I.C.A.U. the newly organized teams had little chance of recognition from the owners of Celtic Park. Consequently, teams like Westmeath and Monaghan held their matches in October 1904 by obtaining a permit at Crotona Park at 177th Street and Third Avenue in the Bronx. The two teams invited the more proficient teams to meet them there in order that they

could learn from the better players and develop a seasoned team for themselves.

Celtic Park was notorious for the poor attention it sometimes paid to its grounds and this was more evident in its treatment of the smaller county teams. One anonymous hurler, for example, wrote in 1909 a bitter letter to the *Irish Advocate*, a New York weekly, pointing to the wretched and neglected condition of the park, claiming that conditions were so bad that the high grass made hurling an impossibility. Alternately, there were some parts of the field which were so bare that it reminded the hurler of "dogs with the mange." He concluded his letter by suggesting that the owners should "combine humanity with economy by turning in some of the thin cows outside the fence and let them eat it down."

A showdown was approaching between the owners of Celtic Park and the Irish Counties Athletic Union. In 1908, a delegate brought news to a meeting that a fine parcel of land, suitable for grounds for Gaelic games, was available for sale in Yonkers, right over the border from the Bronx, in the Wakefield section.

The catch was that the \$75,000 price had to be agreed upon at once or the deal would be lost. In a short time, the counties banded together to raise a down payment and mortgaged the remainder to John Haffen, the German-Irish owner of the Haffen Brewery. Haffen was to get the beer concession as part of the deal.

Sunday was the day when the Irish attended religious services in the morning and enjoyed outdoor sports and activities in the afternoon. Unfortunately, nobody had counted on the City of Yonkers to step in to exercise its blue laws prohibiting Sunday games in its jurisdiction. The new park, Wakefield Park, was dead from the beginning.

The counties fought hard to save Wakefield Park. Carnegie Hall was hired for a fund-raising rally at which at least one county organization donated one thousand dollars and a dozen other amounts of several hundred dollars. Archbishop, and future cardinal of New York, Farley's contribution of \$200 was among the many notables who donated to the cause. No amount of fundraising, however, could alter the fact that without the approval of the City of Yonkers there would never be a successful Irish sporting ground on the site. Inevitably, the mortgage was foreclosed, and all the money of county organizations and sympathetic individuals went down the drain.

As 1909 began, I.C.A.U. meetings managed to attract only twenty or so delegates as they listened to one speech after another from outgoing officers and committees reporting failures. An Irish weekly reported "Officers Going A Begging" and it was only with difficulty that the outgoing president Con Meaney and the rest of his board were prevailed upon to remain for another term.

The Wakefield Park project was a gamble, but a noble one. It was a heavy blow to the Irish Counties Athletic Union, but it did not prove fatal.

Remarkably, the I.C.A.U. rebounded. The sixth annual ball on January 15, 1910, was such a tremendous success that it marked a kind of public vindication of the courageous I.C.A.U. It was held at the Grand Central Palace where an incredible 10,000 people took part in the grand march, a promenade of couples, at eleven o'clock.

Twenty traditional Irish dancing classes representing individual county societies took part in a gala exhibition of reels, jigs and set dances. The uilleann piper, Dermot O'Callan, performed the "Fox Hunter's Jig" in such a masterful manner that his listeners could imagine the cry of the fox and the barking of the hounds.

ALL IRELAND IN THE CITY

Shortly after the organization of the Irish Counties Athletic Association, a building was secured for use as a clubhouse for its members. The first location was at 341 West 47th Street, not far from where the Irish Institute had its building fifty years later. The clubhouse was rented annually rather than purchased and in 1908 the annual rent was just \$2,000 a year. It was a great place to meet friends, have weekly Monday business meetings and occasional socials.

- In June 1907, a bazaar was held at the new clubhouse over a ten-day period, featuring a booth for each of the 32 counties.
- An ice cream festival was held in the building in 1911.
- A shuffleboard tournament was conducted in 1911 with 14 participating county teams of five men each.

For the most part however, members just got together to avail themselves of the activities open to county association members: bowling, billiards, pool and gymnastics. After a few years, the organization moved to a new clubhouse at East 47th Street where it stayed until the mid-1920s.

In the period before World War I, almost all the Irish county organizations, as well as the Irish County Athletic Union, supported the Irish Parliamentary Party headed by John E. Redmond, the M.P. for Wexford.

On many occasions when members of this party visited the city to collect funds, the I.C.A.U. was on hand to render help. In October 1910, Redmond and three other Irish Members of Parliament; T.P. O'Connor, Joseph Devlin and Daniel Boyle, came to New York to appear at a big rally held in Carnegie Hall. In addition to a donation for the occasion, a box of seats in the hall was purchased for the officers and members.

By January 1915, a more militant strain was making its way into the ranks of the county organization. A fundraiser was held with all the proceeds going towards the purchase of arms and equipment for the Irish Volunteer Fund. A faction of the volunteers organized the Easter Rebellion in 1916. From that point on the

New York Irish organizations almost universally rallied to the militant Republicans seeking complete separation from Britain. American politics was also a concern to the counties, but certainly it did not hit the same fever pitch that Irish nationalism reached during the Irish War for Independence 1919-1921.

Support from the counties in American politics usually went only to a "favorite son," an individual who was either an active member or especially prominent in the Irish community. In 1909, James J. Hagan, a member of the Longford Association and well-known to dozens of other county societies, received the endorsement of the "Irish County Campaign Committee" in his unsuccessful bid for the office of County Clerk of New York County. His nomination was "largely due to the pressure brought upon the leaders of Tammany Hall by a committee of members of the county associations."

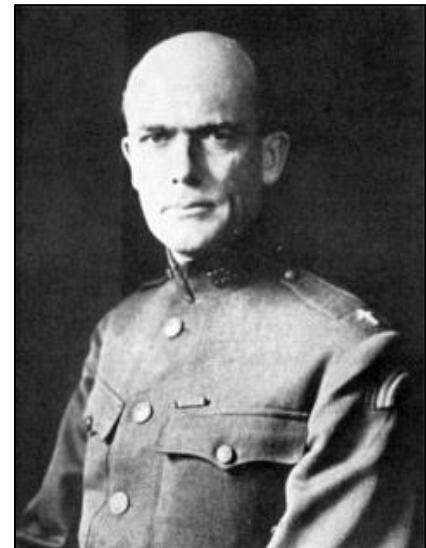
Another favorite was John Purroy Mitchel, grandson of Irish patriot John Mitchel. John was endorsed for a successful race for mayor in 1913. Mitchel, however, fell out of the good graces of many of the counties because of his strident pro-British views prior to America's entry into the war.

It has been written that on the occasion when the Gaelic Athletic Association in New York was finally organized on its current model in 1914, the athletic portion of the Irish Counties Athletic Association was merged into the G.A.A. The I.C.A.U., however, was still sponsoring athletic meets as late as 1917. But sometime before 1920 the name Irish Counties Athletic Union was completely retired and only the name United Irish Counties was used instead.

HELPING HANDS

America entered World War I in 1917. Long before 1917, the New York's Irish regiment, the "Fighting 69th" had been preparing for the conflict. Father Francis Duffy, pictured on the right, was the heroic chaplain of the unit. In his autobiography, he wrote that the county organizations were a major source of recruits for the regiment.

A close relationship had long existed between the regiment and the counties and it was further developed by the United Irish Counties which acted as the unofficial representative of the New York Irish at the formal military reviews held in their Lexington Avenue armory.



Hundreds of county members flocked to its colors and when the regiment got to the front in France in 1918, report after report appeared in the New York Irish weeklies of the exploits of the many county men in the ranks. Throughout the war the UIC raised money and

comforts for its serving members that included a supply of Gaelic footballs and hurling equipment.

The United Irish Counties did not forget the returning soldiers. In April 1919, a scheme to provide employment for veterans was unveiled in conjunction with the mayor's office. One of the cooperating organizations was the Irish-American Chauffeurs Association which promised to train drivers and secure jobs for them.

While programs were in place to help people in need, many of the good works of the United Irish Counties went unsung because it was often just one individual helping another.

Such a case occurred in 1922 when a seventeen-year old youth named Ralph Kay from Philadelphia was arrested for stealing a suitcase. It looked like he was just another criminal until a sympathetic judge reviewed his history. Kay's life was revealed to be a harsh one, from a broken home and placed in an institution by his mother at an early age. Kay was released as a teenager to make a life on his own.

He rode a freight train to New York and endured homelessness, slept in doorways and park benches at night. He stole the suitcase because he was so desperate from hunger he couldn't think of anything else to do. He was so weak from hunger that he was unable to lug the suitcase very far and that alone was the cause of his arrest.

District Attorney Banton told the story while addressing a meeting of the UIC and asked, "Is there anybody here who is willing to gamble on the chance that this boy is worth saving?" Patrick J. Collins, Committee Chairman of the United Irish Counties, without hesitation answered, "I will. Turn him over to me and I'll not alone get him a good job, but I'll be a father to him."

The next day Collins was in court when District Attorney Banton asked the judge to suspend sentence. Young Kay broke into tears when the D.A. told him what Collins was willing to do for him. Collins threw his arm over the boy and escorted him to the Conley Tinfoil Company at West 25th Street where he got him a job at \$15 a week and found him a home.

Although county societies were from time to time dropping out of affiliation with the United Irish Counties, when the 20th Anniversary was held at the Hotel Commodore in 1924 all 32 counties were represented.

President Tom Delaney from Tipperary told the crowd that every part of Ireland and every political division there was represented. This was an obvious reference to the rancor caused by the Irish Civil War which had created deep divisions in the New York Irish community in the city.

Delaney offered the UIC as a model for Ireland and said:

“Yet we are organized, Catholic and Protestant, Democrat and Republican, in perfect harmony of purpose and in unity of action, to help our fellow citizens here and all our friends in Ireland. In fact, we believe that all of Ireland’s present troubles due to political divisions or the question of boundary lines between the North and South of Ireland, could be adjusted if the Irish leaders would follow our example here in America and get together for the common good of all irrespective of creed and politics.”

The 1926 Annual Ball was held at the Waldorf Astoria and it was announced that all proceeds would go towards the establishment of an “Irish Home,” a building at which all the social and business activities of the UIC and its member organizations could be held.

At a reception at the Hotel Astor in 1929, United Irish Counties speakers, including Father Francis Duffy of the “Fighting 69th”, announced their support for a planned \$2.5 million center. It was hinted that an anonymous donor was about to donate property worth \$1.5 million. However, the worsening economic conditions of the Great Depression brought the entire project to an unsuccessful conclusion in the early 1930s.

In 1933, the UIC opened an office in the old Knights of Columbus Hotel at 51st and 8th Avenue to help the unemployed. Named the Central Bureau of Information, it served as an employment bureau for the thousands of unemployed immigrants in the city. Until World War II, the proceeds of every annual ball went to the upkeep of this very helpful service.

The United Irish Counties’ Feis has a long tradition in NYC.

- The First Annual United Irish Counties’ Feis was held in 1933 at Wingate Field in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn.
- In 1934, it relocated to the Bronx Coliseum.
- In 1937, the Windsor Palace at West 66th Street was the location.
- In 1940, it was held at the Innisfail Park (now Gaelic Park)
- Finally, in 1941 it moved again to the Fordham University Rose Hill Campus in the Bronx.

The UIC Feis grew rapidly from 1,200 competitors in 1934 to more than 4,200 contestants in 1952. The number of admissions similarly rose from about 10,000 in 1935 to 33,000 in 1950. Feis winners, including dancers, singers, musicians and choral groups, were shortly afterward featured in live performances at an annual UIC concert held at Town Hall on East 43rd Street. On this occasion, medals were presented to the winners.

During World War II, the UIC donated the proceeds of the annual feis over to the United Services organization that provided the comforts of home to soldiers during their leave while away from home.

At the 1943 UIC Annual Ball, a service flag bearing the name of over 5,000 soldiers of Irish descent serving in the military from the New York area was a feature of the evening's events. The color guard of the 69th Regiment, many of whose soldiers had again been drawn from the ranks of the Irish counties, was given the honor of the actual unveiling. The same regiment escorted thousands of UIC members in an annual parade, after World War II, on the East Side. These parades concluded in a service at the Irish Carmelite Church in East 28th Street.

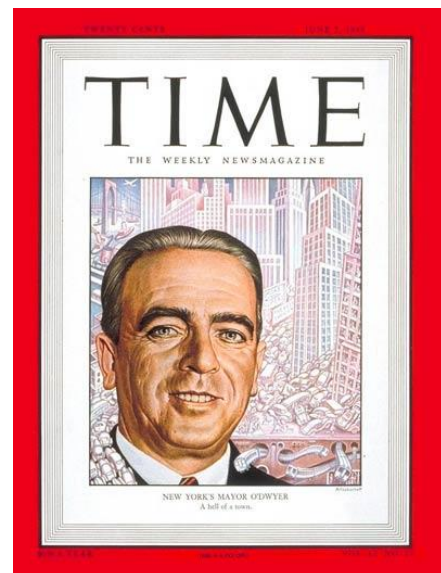
AFTER WORLD WAR II

A massive drive to highlight the plight of a divided Ireland began in 1947 and was called the anti-partition campaign. It was believed that simply publicizing the unnatural division of the island of Ireland would be enough to embarrass Britain so that Britain would allow the reunification of the country.

UIC rallies were frequently held at Manhattan Center where former UIC President Matthew Troy from Westmeath called for an end to "the Iron Border of Bigotry." Troy also led many demonstrations and picket lines of Irish county members against visiting British officials such as Prime Minister Basil Brooke of Northern Ireland in 1950 and even Winston Churchill when he came for dinner at the Baruch apartment in East 66th Street in 1952.

A favorite son of the United Irish Counties was certainly Mayor William O'Dwyer who rose from a term as President of the County Mayo Association and officer of the Irish Counties to become the leader of America's largest city. Mayor O'Dwyer was no stranger to thousands of members of the UIC, most of whom knew him by his first name. The Irish were very fond of the down-to-earth Mayoman and remained his most loyal supporters. Paul O'Dwyer, who was to become City Council President, was chairman of the feis for many years and a past president of the UIC.

(Note: to the right is a June 7th, 1948 Time Magazine cover with a photo of Mayor William O'Dwyer. Cover Credit to Boris Artzybasheff.)



Beginning at this time, many counties that had long maintained separate men's and women's organizations combined as one. The United Irish Counties Ladies Auxiliary had only 6 affiliated groups in 1945 and shortly afterward it became defunct.

The last large wave of immigration came in the 1950s to NYC. Although less than a third the numbers that came in the late 1920s and early thirties, it was enough to fill the ranks and provide the fuel to make the decade one of the best experienced by the county societies in the city. The signs of change, however,

were all over. Neighborhoods that had been predominantly Irish for years began to lose their old population to the suburbs. The push of many middle-class residents to points 50 miles or more from Manhattan was made possible by highways and commuter railways, but it also meant that the pool of Irish to serve as officers and committee members in the United Irish Counties Association was ever diminishing. When immigrants clustered in neighborhoods that were close to one another in Manhattan and the surrounding boroughs, there was still a more or less a cohesive Irish community. It was just a short bus or subway ride away to enjoy the company of people from "the old place." But geography was starting to play a big part in the future of the city's Irish societies.

In one respect, condition had already been altered to meet the loss of new blood from Ireland. In the early years, membership in the county organizations had been almost exclusively Irish-born immigrants. A letter of one county association officer, John M. Griffin, to the *Irish Advocate* in 1918 pointed out that since immigration had been virtually nil from Ireland due to the war, fully 90% of the source of membership had been lost.

In the 1920s and 1930s an infusion of American-born Irish began and in a short time it was not uncommon for many of them to be active workers and leaders. In 1933, for example, the County Galway Men's Association reported that in the most recent years more and more Irish-Americans had joined so that its incoming officers for the next year were equally divided between those born in New York and those born in Ireland.

By the end of 1950s, Manhattan was no longer the focal point for the city's Irish. Increasingly, activities started to drift away from the center of the city to new locations on the periphery and in the suburbs. The Manhattan hotels that had always been the only choice for county society socials began to yield to catering halls in the Bronx, Queens, and occasionally, Brooklyn.

It became harder to get people to take the trip into an increasingly congested Manhattan for meetings and social events. The question became just what location would be the most convenient and attract the maximum amount of support.

The success of the United Irish Counties has always been in that special pride of place that makes the men and women of Ireland and their descendants love the town or townland from whence they came.

It was never enough to be just Irish. It was always a necessity to know the spot where it all began – the point from which generation after generation struggled to survive and prosper. Members of Ireland's county associations in New York not only know the rock from which they sprung, but glory in the fact they will preserve it for their children and their children's children for all the time to come.

Many thanks to John T. Ridge for compiling our history.