

## **The United Irish Counties Going Forward**

*By Mary McMullan & Mae O'Driscoll  
(December 2003)*

By the 1970s the adverse effects of the 1965 Immigration Act were sorely felt by the Irish Organizations. The 1965 Act had abolished the ethnic quota system which had been applied by the United States to Northern Europe including Ireland.

In response to this legislation the United Irish Counties Association (UICA) formed an immigration committee to lobby for the repeal of the 1965 Act. This committee was headed by Judge John Collins, a delegate from Limerick, John Kerry O'Donnell, Michael Keane (Kerry), John Carroll, (Galway) and Fr. Donal O'Callaghan, a Carmelite priest and a delegate from Cork among others. Fr. O'Callaghan led several delegations to Washington to meet with Members of Congress to urge them to amend the 1965 Act. However, their efforts were unsuccessful.

With the decrease in immigration, membership in the county organizations dwindled. Despite this, the UICA has continued to be a vibrant part of the Irish community, promoting and preserving our Irish heritage and culture, keeping true to the goals of our founding members. Our meetings are still held on the third Wednesday of each month with representation from approximately seventy-five per cent of the thirty-four affiliated organizations in attendance. In addition, to the thirty-two counties we have the Irish American Society of Nassau, Suffolk and Queens and the "Dalcassian" Club. Each affiliated organization is entitled to eight delegates and three alternate delegates to the parent body. Our Feis, in existence since 1933, is still held in June each year and continues to be a financial and cultural success.

In 1969, we initiated the "Gael of the Year" Award and chose Thomas W. Tobin as the first recipient. Under the leadership of Pat Thompson (Longford), the Ball was held at the Statler Hilton Hotel with the Noel Kingston orchestra and was a huge success. Michael Keane (Kerry) was chairman and Brenda Kearns (Louth) was the journal chairperson.

In 1974, under the leadership of then President Kevin Morrissey, with a grant from the Human Resources Department of the City of New York, the UICA established the Community Action Bureau with offices in Manhattan, Bay Ridge, Brooklyn and Fordham in the Bronx. The late Peter Campbell served as its Executive Director. The purpose of the Bureau was to give advice and help to those in the Irish community particularly the elderly to obtain the federal, state and city benefits to which they were entitled. This was made possible by the efforts of the late Paul O'Dwyer, (Mayo) President of the New York City Council at the time. Paul O'Dwyer is renowned for his lifetime commitment to human and civil rights around the world and particularly in Northern Ireland.

In some ways this assistance was similar to that of the "Irish Bureau" established in 1933 with volunteer help, until 1941 when the legendary Maureen Mulcahy was appointed Executive Secretary. Maureen started her day by visiting major corporations, hospitals hotels and other businesses. The purpose was to find jobs for recent arrivals from Ireland. Maureen gave unselfishly of her time, talent, and expertise, and to this day is fondly remembered with deep gratitude by those for whom she found employment or helped in anyway. Many successful business people today got their first job because of Maureen's efforts and dedication. In 1978, Sue Gallagher (Donegal) was also named Executive Secretary and continued to work with Maureen at the Bureau until the sale of the Irish Institute in 1982. This was the building where the UICA offices were located.

By the mid-1980s resulting from the downturn of the Irish economy a new wave of immigrants had entered the United States. However, this time these new arrivals or the "New Irish" as they became known were undocumented and faced far different problems than their predecessors. Responding to the needs of the recent arrivals a new organization called the Irish Immigration Reform Movement (IIRM) was established at a meeting of the County Cork Association in May 1987. The UICA immediately offered their assistance by putting their office at the disposal of the newly formed IIRM. The IIRM used this office until the end of 1988 when it was closed. The objectives of the IIRM were to secure an amnesty for all illegal aliens living in the United States; to establish a large annual non-preference quota of immigrant visas for Ireland and the other 35 countries adversely affected by the Immigration Act of 1965. Their efforts resulted in the passage of the Immigration Act of 1990 giving 48,000 visas to the Irish. Those visas are known as the "Morrison Visas" named for Congressman Bruce Morrison from Connecticut.

When the county groups were established they were traditionally male organizations. Later the women formed their own organizations which were named "The Ladies Auxiliary". By the 1980s most of the Ladies Auxiliary organizations had been disbanded and women were accepted as full members of the County Associations. As a result, many delegates to the UICA were women. In 1989, history was made when the UICA elected its first woman President – Anna McElroy from Co. Louth. In the same year, the St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee elected its first female Grand Marshal – Dorothy Hayden Cudahy (Kilkenny). Since that time four women have served as Presidents and in 1995 Mary McMullan (Derry) was the first person from Northern Ireland to serve as President. History was made again in 1999 with the election of Brenda Kearns (Louth) whose husband Martin Kearns (Roscommon) was President (1975-1976) making the first husband and wife elected President and our current President, Catherine Mitchell Miceli is the first President from Co. Leitrim.

In 1992, the UICA was the only Irish organization invited to participate in the Columbus Day Parade in New York City celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus.

In 1997, the UICA was honored to have Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Fein march with our contingent in the St. Patrick's Day Parade. In the tradition of our

predecessors we have continued to support the freedom of all Ireland and receive reports on the situation in Northern Ireland at our monthly meetings. In the same year under the leadership of Mary McMullan the proceeds from our annual dinner dance was donated to the Great Hunger Memorial in New York City.

In 2000, the UICA was one of the organizations advocating for New York City as the site for the 2012 Olympics. In 2002, we instituted the Distinguished Service Award to recognize outstanding contributions of delegates and persons who have excelled in their commitment to the ideals of our Association.

This year to mark our centennial we have introduced a scholarship program which award scholarships on the middle school level. The scholarships will be open to children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews of members of affiliated organizations.

Twenty-five years ago on the occasion of our Diamond Jubilee, Judge James J. Comerford, writing in the souvenir journal expressed the hope that when we celebrate our centennial "that all of Ireland the ancestral home of millions of Americans will long before then have become geographically and politically united, that it will have become an Irish Republic of thirty two counties, and that it will have taken its place among the free nations of the world".

Unfortunately, we have not realized these aspirations, the bloodshed continues, and thousands have died. As we celebrate this milestone tonight, it is our hope that when we celebrate our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Ireland will be a United Republic and at peace. Progress has been made with the signing of the "Good Friday Agreement" which has yet to be fully implemented. We salute tonight's "Gael of the Year" Congressman Peter T. King for his part in the negotiations that led to this historic agreement and his continuing pursuit of a just resolution. In one hundred years we have seen many changes in the growth of New York City and the United States, the development of the automobile, aircraft, space craft, with man going to the moon and beyond, and today's modern technology which we could never have envisioned.

The United Irish Counties Association is proud of its demonstrated loyalty and devotion to the United States and proud of the service its members have given to this country in time of war and peace. Twenty-five years from now in 2029 when the UCIA celebrates, there will be many more changes in the world. It is our fervent hope that the United States will be free from terrorists' attacks, that we will never have witnessed another day like September 11, 2001 and that the Stars and Stripes will forever be a symbol of freedom and hope for all mankind.