THE IRISH OF LANARK . . . AND A CHURCH THEY NAMED ST. PATRICKS

By Alice Loberg

"Sure, and you's be a good lad to go down the river with" was an affectionate greeting of Peter Doyle, when he met Chet Loberg, who delivered fuel oil to his home many years ago. Many of these warm expressions, often humorous phrases are heard very little around this area any more.

The phrases are distinctly Irish, and the town of Lanark is no longer an Irish settlement. The melodic Irish names have mostly disappeared. There are some Rileys, former O'Reilly, Clintons, once McAlindon, Burns, O'Bouren.

A visit to the cemetery at St. Patricks church in Lanark, will reveal the large community of Irish immigrants at one time.

The earliest were Hugh McGreer, of county Antim, Robert Campbell of county Tyrone, Henry Clinton, county Armah, who had all applied for naturalization before 1845. Then Patrick O'Reilly, Angus McCauley, Patrick Dunn, Robert McNamara, Moses Leary, James McVanamee, Edmund Cooney, Barth Mahanna, Lakey Flynn, John Gray, Patrick Timlin, Michael Hopkins, Patrick Ryan, Michael Lynch, Patrick O'Sullivan, James Daugherty, Martin Loftis, Patrick O'Keefe.

Early Irish settlers, John Gray and June Dunn Gray. No guest was allowed to leave their home without "a meal of vittals".

Below the Fleming settlement, the Tomorrow River is fed by additional streams. Here in the town of Lanark, is where the colony of Irish and Scotch immigrants settled, in the hardwood forests of white and red oak, ash and hickory trees.

They had been attracted by the lumber industry. The Wisconsin Pinery and the Wisconsin Lumberman furnished the news to the scattered immigrants in New York and New England. Many of them had already become American citizens.

The rise of the lumber industry in Wisconsin was so rapid that in a short time, it had destroyed the markets in New York and Pennsylvania.

In 1858, an estimated 18,500,000 feet of pine was cut in central Wisconsin. The lumber was mostly rafted down the Wisconsin to the Mississippi river to Dubuque and St. Louis. The industry was extremely dangerous as thousands of men became involved in the lumber industry. The woods were filled with choppers, loggers and teams.

As the industry increased, many men began to look for a cheaper and more practical way of obtaining supplies, which had been coming by boat upstream from southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois.

Some of the men started raising their own products, and as they succeeded, many others turned to the soil, trading in their bobsleighs for plows and settling down on the land. The Irish were among the first to return to the land, and formed the settlement in Lanark, named by

Thomas Swan, after his birthplace in Lanark, Scotland.

The first immigrants were discouraged from settling in rural areas, by the priests, who feared they would lose contact with the church. Although it wasn't long before a visiting priest came to the area.

When the priest came, usually in the evening, the younger members in the community lighted their lanterns, and on foot, covered the district, notifying the people of the presence of the priest, and the time and place of mass the next morning. Confessions were held before mass and communion distributed during mass. After the mass, the priest gave a short instruction and baptized any that had not been baptized.

An excerpt from the Amherst Advocate said "Life was full of hardships for these Irish immigrants, many had left homes of refinement in the Emerald Isle across the sea, to find the new country little else than hard labor. Little children, as well as women, were taught to use fire ammunition at an early age. They learned wonderful courage and presence of mind and were taught that some people were dangerous only when their intended victim showed cowardice. They knew the Indian's contempt of those who showed fear, and when a stalwart form suddenly appeared in the doorway, or window, they knew how to smother cries of horror and feigned indifference. The excerpt is from an article "A Trip Through Lanark" ". . .though bitterly disappointed and utterly lonely," it went on, "they had stubborn bravery and patient endurance, today, their oxen are replaced by up to date transportation and they have fine homes and farms."

Traditionally, the Irish were Democrats in politics, and many took an active part, locally and at state levels. Three native born Irish men took a prominent part in the convention that drafted the Wisconsin constitution in 1845. Their attraction to the Democratic party came from the feeling that the party was more sympathetic to the hardship of the immigrant.

In addition to religion and politics, education was also foremost in their lives. No other foreign nationality comparable in number, had as many of its sons and daughters enter the field of education. It was quite the exception to find an Irish home with girls where one or more were not teachers, and sons who had become priests or lawyers.

They were good storytellers and few other nationalities could approach them for good response. A candidate for sheriff of Portage county had been told by his supporters that a certain Irish farmer controlled the votes in one section of the county. When he approached the farmer, he was promised support if "the boys" could have a picnic with beer. This was arranged. On election night, the balloting was strongly against the candidate, but he was sure the territory controlled by the Irish farmer would pull him through. Later, when he met the farmer, he started to upbraid him for the small support. "How do you account for your friends failing to vote for me?" he demanded, "I did as I agreed, but did you?" "You

ran mighty well for a man the people didn't want," responded the Irish farmer.

The Irish had a patriotic fervor associated with the name of Patrick. So it was no surprise that the Irish in Lanark named their first church, St. Patricks.

In 1870, they erected the first church in southeastern Portage county. Parish records of 1860 list Angus McGillway, Manny Denis, Thomas Wottern, Patrick Stenson, Patrick Ryan, later Peter Hanley, James Quinn, Dennis Leahy, Patrick O'Reilly, Michael Hopkins, Michael Lynch, Patrick Sullivan, Patrick Dunn, John Shavelin, Peter Raeder, Hiram Clinton, Patrick Leonard, Martin Loftis, Thomas Reilly.

The church, 20 by 30 feet, was built of white pine. The pews were rough wooden benches without backs. The land was donated by Patrick and Catherine Ryan. In 1886, a class of 34 were confirmed by Bishop Katzer. It was the first visit of a bishop to the new parish.

The present church was built in 1888. The building committee consisted of Father Geiszler, Patrick Ryan, Patrick Leary. The structure was 40 by 80 feet and cost $450.00.

Work started in the spring, and on July 3, a windstorm wrecked the structure, and the next morning, the parishioners brought their teams and WITH ROPES, PULLED THE BUILDING BACK INTO SHAPE.

For several years, it was an unfinished building, the benches from the original church were used, and the walls were not lathed or plastered. St. Patricks became an established parish in 1890, with its own priest, the Rev. Lawrence Splitzelberger. He was a large powerful man, working bareheaded and barefooted. He possessed a knowledge of home remedies and the names of remedial herbs and roots. At this time, the parish consisted of 64 families, 372 persons. Each year, the church observes St. Patricks Day with a dinner and a social gathering. This has continued through the years, since it originated.

When the church was built, it was decided to move the old cemetery, located a few miles to the west, to a lot adjacent to the church. Among those buried in this cemetery were some who died of smallpox, including John Gray. The fear of smallpox was so great, that these graves were not moved. It was believed that the germs might escape. Although John Gray's body was never moved, his name appears beneath that of his wife, Jane, on the tombstone in the cemetery adjacent to the church. The marker reads, Jane Gray, born December 16, 1819, died January 31, 1901. Beneath the inscription, John Gray, died August 13, 1863, aged 50 years.

According to Malcolm Rosholt's "Our County, Our Story," there was a legend that the dead who were left behind became disconsolate at the deliberate oversight and assumed the form of a fiery dog, which roamed the neighborhood at night. "One of the Phelps boys" he wrote, "whose family operated the Phelps tavern house a short distance up the road, was driving by the graveyard one night, when one of the horses hoofs struck a stone, which sent off a spark. Thinking that the Fiery Dog had run directly under the wheel, young Phelps whipped his horses into a furious gallop and arrived home white in the face. But the Fiery Dog had not been seen in many decades, while the several neglected gravestones nearby in the grass are still there."

The "Irish Wakes" were occasions of mixed emotions, sadness at the death of a loved one, but they often developed into heavy drinking parties, as they attempted to drown their sorrow, and as they kept vigil with the dead body until buried. Albert Krutza remembers one night when a member of the party "passed out" after drinking too much moonshine. Other members of the party removed the dead body and placed the drunken man in the coffin. Krutza said there was "a lot of singing and everyone smoked clay pipes."

The Irish were well known for their hospitality and it was said that Jane Gray asked anyone stopping by to "a meal of vittals." It didn't matter who, she would not allow anyone to leave without food and coffee. It was, to her, a terrible insult and a discredit to her household if that hospitality wasn't shown.

So, farewell—"may the wind be at your back," "may the road rise up to greet you," and "may you be in Heaven a half hour before the devil knows you're dead."