

---

---

# MOHAWK VALLEY IRISH CULTURAL EVENTS NEWSLETTER

---

---

Volume 6, Issue 8

August 2009

---

---

## Record Crowds Enjoy 2009 Great American Irish Festival

A recent article in a Boston newspaper (yes, there are some newspapers that actually run articles on Irish festivals) mentioned that almost every Irish festival in the country was having a down year in these tough economic times, and predicted hard times for those fests that remained.



Well, apparently no one at the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Great American Irish Festival read that particular item, as people turned out in record numbers to enjoy the weekend at the Herkimer County Fairgrounds. The event shattered attendance records over the July 24-26 weekend, with an estimated crowd of 54,000 coming through the gates, cementing GAIF's reputation as the fastest growing event of its kind in the world and staking a strong claim as the best Irish festival in the Northeast, if not the country.

“We ordered an 80’ x 210’ tent this year and we wondered if we'd fill it,” said GAIF Director Matt Sullivan. “It was not only filled all weekend long, we had crowds 15-20 deep on the outside of the tent.”

With rain throughout the day on Friday, festival officials had some concerns about the turnout, but once again they underestimated the resolve of GAIF fans. From the opening sets of the legendary folk group The Dublin City Ramblers and Canada's Pogey (this year's clear fan favorite among the first-time bands) to the electrifying closing sets of Barleyjuice and Enter the Haggis – who stunned the crowd with a Rage Against the Machine cover for their encore – the level of world-class entertainment never let up and the audience built throughout the night to a huge crowd by the time the night ended.

Those who have attended GAIF every year may have noticed a weather pattern that brings good conditions every other year. Other than Friday's steady drizzle, that pattern held true, as Saturday brought sunshine and warm weather to greet the festival's largest single-day crowd ever. The day started off with Michelle Nizzi of Frankfort and David Putney of Newport successfully defending their respective 5K Ranger Run titles (complete run results are still being tabulated but, word is, I was not among the winners) and by noon the sounds of the EUSPBA Sanctioned Bagpipe Competition were filling the fairgrounds. At 4:30 on the dot, the stages shut down and an enormous crowd gathered for the massed bagpipe performance. They were not disappointed, as the event, featuring over 250 individual pipers and drummers, was nothing short of spectacular, raising both cheers and goose-bumps from all who were watching.



### Winners of the 2009 GAIF Bagpipe Competition:

- Grade 1, 1st Place: Oran Mor
- Grade 3, 1st Place: Mohawk Valley Frasers
- Grade 3, 2nd Place: Scotia Glenville
- Grade 4, 1st Place: Schenectady
- Grade 5, 1st Place: Albany Police

“The growth we had in one year is amazing, and I expect it to be even bigger next year,” said competition chairman Pat O’Hara. His optimism seems well-placed, as one drum major posted on a bagpipe forum, “If this event is not on your schedule for next year - put it on.”

Highlights of Saturday’s entertainment are far too numerous to mention, except to say there was not a single bad set on any of the three stages. Brilliant sets from festival favorites Rathkeltair, Barleyjuice and the Fenians kept the Contemporary Stage crowd on its feet, while on the Traditional Stage, the Dublin City Ramblers showed why they are considered Ireland’s No. 1 folk band, and Derek Warfield and the Young Wolfetones and the Tannahill Weavers turned in virtuoso performances. Nothing, however, could have prepared audiences for the closing sets by Enter the Haggis and The Elders.



“After hearing the Haggis set, we knew we had to step it up,” commented Elders’ bass player Norm Dahlor, who noted that the two bands, who have become very close friends, constantly push each other to new heights. He needn’t have worried. The ETH set was astounding; the Elders set which followed was magical. At one point, when GAIF Director Matt Sullivan presented an American flag to vocalist Ian Byrne, who had just passed his U.S. citizenship test, the cheer that went up must have left people miles away in Utica wondering what the commotion was about. By the time the set was through they had left no doubt as to their status at the top of the ranks of Celtic rock bands.

Sunday may have been quieter, but only by comparison. The 10:30 mass again proved to be hugely successful, with the music provided brilliantly by Pat Kane (who was again a major presence at the festival, singing the Irish and American national anthems before the race, running a dance workshop, and performing his own excellent sets.) The previous two days had done nothing to diminish the Sunday crowd’s energy, as once again the enormous tent was filled to capacity. As if they hadn’t done enough this year, the Elders – as they have the previous two years – performed at a private post-fest party for the incredible GAIF volunteers. Ian Byrne has said that this volunteer party is one of his favorite parts of the festival, and the Elders proved it with yet another stellar show. It was, as a post on the Elders’ message board put it, “the perfect ending to a perfect weekend.”

“It’s always satisfying to see how the hard work year-round of 60 dedicated committee members and 800 volunteers at the event pays off,” said Sullivan. “Performers, sponsors, and fest-goers had nothing but complimentary remarks all weekend long.”

NOTE: Remember, the closing party is for volunteers only, so if you don’t want to miss out next year, mark your calendars now for the last weekend in July, 2010, to volunteer for the 2010 Great American Irish Festival.

## Sterling Celtic Rock Festival “Plugged-In & Piped-Up!”

On the weekend of August 22-23, after the mythical town of Warwick, England disappears into the mist for another year, the Sterling Renaissance Festival Grounds come alive with the sounds of 21<sup>st</sup> century Celtic music. The first ever Sterling Celtic Rock Festival will be held, rain or shine, from 11 AM to 7 PM on Saturday and Sunday, with performances by an outstanding lineup of today’s hottest acts. Taking over the Wyldwood, Mud Pit, Bankside and Festival Stages from the ghosts of Don Juan and Miguel, Johnny Fox and Giacomo the Jester will be **Enter the Haggis, The Glengarry Bhoys, Barleyjuice, Rathkeltair, Searson, Cara** and others. Imported beer and wine, traditional foods and unique gifts will be available all weekend, and parking is free. Adult tickets are \$19.95 per admission when purchased in advance, \$25.00 at the gate, with children 6-12 getting in for \$14.95. Advance tickets can be purchased online [here](#), or at the Festival Box Office during the run of the Renaissance Festival (Saturdays and Sundays until August 16th). The Sterling Renaissance Festival Grounds are located in Sterling, NY, just 45 minutes north of Syracuse, near Oswego, and one hour east of Rochester. For more information, call (800) 879-4446 or visit <http://www.sterlingceltic.com/index.html>.



*Book Review:*  
**“The Gathering”**  
*By Mark Sisti*

“The Gathering” by Anne Enright is a very, very good book. Or it’s a piece of crap. Apparently, there is no in-between, or at least that’s the impression you get if you read the countless online literature message boards. Even taking into account that most people who write their ideas on internet message boards do so because they’re not allowed to use sharp utensils, this dichotomy is startling. People either love this book or hate it with the passion of a thousand white-hot suns. Put me in the former group, but I can understand the latter.

The plot, such as it is, deals with nine surviving siblings gathering in the Hegarty family home for the wake of their brother Liam, who has committed suicide. The story, as told by Liam’s sister Veronica, takes us through the making of the arrangements for Liam’s funeral; the wake and burial, where she reconnects with most of her dysfunctional family; the lives of her grandparents and her own childhood growing up in Dublin; and contemplations on her present life, including her relationships with her husband and her family. In trying to make sense of her closest brother’s death – and her own life – Veronica recalls the past, some real and some imagined. But recalling hardly describes the narration in this compelling if, at times, frustrating book. For Veronica lets us know right off the bat that she is a notoriously untrustworthy narrator. She is neither remembering the past nor imagining how the past might have been. Rather she is, to use a recently coined word, “misremembering.” She is constantly describing an event and then adding a disclaimer, “Or maybe that’s not the way it happened.” As Victoria puts it, “I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother’s house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen. ... I do not know the truth, or I do not know how to tell the truth. All I have are stories, night thoughts, the sudden convictions that uncertainty spawns ...” Some of this is because her thoughts have become so jumbled she no longer knows what is true and what isn’t, and some of it is deliberate. She places herself in the role one of her siblings might have filled at the time, or she creates an entire fantasy history of events in her grandmother’s life. As a result, the story she is telling unfolds in a way that is disjointed and convoluted, with no attempt to be chronological or to prioritize. The events that make up the thread of the Hegarty family history come out as they come to Veronica, with no interest in imposing order, and we are never really sure which events really happened and which did not.

This is partly what has bothered many readers. Her writing has been described as haphazard, confusing and self-indulgent, but these criticisms miss the entire point of the narrative style. Although Enright never comes out and says so, it is fairly clear that Veronica is in the throes of, or on the verge of, a breakdown. She makes statements or takes actions that are wholly irrational, but talks to the reader of them as if they were the most natural thing in the world, even as those around her are baffled or stunned by what she has said or done. She, in fact, comes off much of the time as thoroughly unlikable, intolerant of her obviously damaged mother or of her husband, who hardly seems worthy of her venomous condemnations of him. There are hints of a deep family secret, and another criticism that has been made is that the secret, when it is revealed, seems not all that shocking. Once again, however, this skirts the issue. We have to realize that, whatever the framework may suggest, this is not the story of the grandmother Ada, or of Liam; it is, at all times, the story of Veronica, and her memories and observations are filtered through the consciousness of a woman at a point of crisis. It is not a coincidence that in her dream-memory of the incident that may have shaped Liam’s future, it is Veronica at the center and not Liam. If John McGahern’s “By The Lake” (May 09 MVICE) is a pastel seascape, then “The Gathering” would be more akin to a Picasso, with distorted yet somehow recognizable images juxtaposed in a seemingly random fashion that begin to form a cohesive pattern the more we take it in. It is probably the sort of complex, multi-layered book that would benefit from multiple readings, but the draining passionate intensity may make that difficult.

Despite the unrelenting depression that permeates the narrative, the book was redeemed, for me at least, by the staggering quality of the writing. This is one of those books that will take a reader longer to read than most, not necessarily because it’s a difficult read, but because every paragraph is fraught with intensity. The prose is unflinchingly honest, with astounding intelligence and emotional depth. It is, to be sure, not for everyone. The raw frankness, whether emotional or, occasionally, sexual, may leave some uncomfortable, and there are no definitive conclusions or easy answers. What is there is writing elevated to its highest level to give us a passionate exploration of human emotions. Or there is a large piece of crap.

## Cortland Celtic Festival to Take Place from Aug 21-22



Mark your calendars now for the 9<sup>th</sup> annual Cortland Celtic Festival, taking place from August 21-22 in Cortland, NY. This fun filled family event offers something for everyone from toddlers who will enjoy seeing all the Celtic breeds of dogs, to grandparents who will enjoy hearing the traditional music of their childhood. There's a 5K Celtic Run on Sunday at 9, sponsored by the Cortland YMCA. The festival boasts a strong lineup of artists, including Ceann, Traonach, Causeway Giants, the Syracuse Irish Session, and GlenRavel. For a complete listing, visit the official Celtic Fest web site at [www.cortlandcelticfestival.org](http://www.cortlandcelticfestival.org). While you're on the site, why not buy your tickets and save time and money!

## Hunter Mountain "International Celtic Festival" set for August 15-16

On August 15-16, Hunter Mountain (Hunter, NY) hosts the annual "International Celtic Festival." The International Celtic Festival brings you the sights and sounds of the Emerald Isles. World-class musicians from Ireland and North America perform on three stages, with plenty of variety to suit any taste. Providing the musical entertainment will be Seven Nations, Black 47, Enter the Haggis, Young Dubliners, Hair of the Dog, Shilelagh Law, Seamus Kennedy, Cliudan, dancers, pipers and much more. On Sunday, dozens of bagpipe bands take part in a pipe band competition. The highlight of the weekend is the Massed March, as hundreds of pipers and drummers march down the mountain in unison. Tickets for the festival are \$14 for adults, with children 12 and under being free. Hunter Mountain is located just over 2 hours north of New York City in the northern Catskill Mountains; a convenient half-hour ride from New York State Thruway exits 20 or 21. For more information, check out their [web site](#).



## 29th Annual Buffalo Irish Festival to be held on August 28-30th

The Grove at the Hamburg Fairgrounds is the site of the 29<sup>th</sup> annual Buffalo Irish Festival, to be held on August 28-30. Heading up the impressive lineup are Enter the Haggis, The Makem and Spain Brothers, The Prodigals, Bohola (called "Irish music's newest supergroup" by The Irish Herald), Dublin City Ramblers, Dady Brothers, The McKrells, Emish, Dave North Trio, Penny Whiskey, Cliudan, The Wild Geese and an original theatrical presentation of "Uniontown," produced by Mary Kate O'Connell. Rounding out the lineup will be Irish dancers, Pipe bands, an Irish mass, and much more. Admission is \$12 for adults and \$10 for kids 4-12 and seniors over 60. Anyone attending the "32-County Parade" between 5 and 6 PM on Friday gets into the festival for free, as does anyone arriving between 10 and 10:30 AM for mass on Sunday. Tickets are available at the Shannon Pub, Tara Gift Shoppe, Buffalo Brewpub and at the Dublin House. For more information, check their [website](#), or contact festival coordinator Kevin Townsell at (716) 743-9348. The Grove at the Hamburg Fairgrounds is located at 5600 McKinley Parkway, in Hamburg, NY.



## The 68<sup>th</sup> CNY Scottish Games and Celtic Festival – Contributed by GAIF 2009 Pipe Competition Chair, Pat O'Hara

The dust has settled. The pipers are gone. The drummers have left and the Valley is silent. An event that took one year to plan was over in a drum beat. While I have already begun planning for next year, I long for the next competition. I miss the camaraderie between the bands, the siren song of the pipes, the pageantry of the massed band performance and the nervous tension just before marching into the circle.

Well, we do not have to wait long. The 68<sup>th</sup> Central New York Scottish Games and Celtic Festival will be held at Long Branch Park on August 8<sup>th</sup>. Long Branch Park is conveniently located West of Syracuse and a wee stone's throw from the NYS Thruway. In fact, you can see the park from the Thruway. The Festival goes from 9 AM until 6 PM and they have solo competitions, band competitions, drum major competitions,

athletic events and highland dance competitions. The band competitions are held in a natural amphitheater. There is plenty of shade and the park is absolutely breathtaking. Also performing this year are Fieldstone, Flyin' Column, Ann Johnston's Irish Dance School, A Harmony of Harps and Scottish historical re-enactors, "Clann of the Wolf." A Ceilidh will also be held at the Entertainment Tent immediately following closing ceremonies. The festival runs from 9 AM to 6 PM, and tickets are \$10 for adults, \$7 for seniors, \$4 for children from 5 to 12 (I'm assuming those are ages and not times) and children under 5 get in free. For more information, visit the CNY Scottish Games and Celtic Festival web site ([here](#)).

## RANDOM RAMBLINGS

✚ **Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub Post Partum Party** On Friday July 31st, Head Hog Pat McCann presents a very special Irish Happy Hour. Not only is it his annual "Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub Post Partum Party" for those of you – and us – who are still a little loath to totally let go of the Great American Irish Fest just yet, it is also a celebration of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Arthur Guinness negotiating his brilliant 9,000 year lease at St. James' Gate Brewery in Dublin. Providing the entertainment – well, the music, anyway – will be his favorite Irish Band, the [Blarney Rebel Band](#), from County O'Neida. As always, they perform all your favorite Irish songs, except ones that they don't want to. He's also bringing in the world champion Irish dancers from Syracuse – and these girls are phenomenal – and will have plenty of cold barmaids and attractive beers. Wait... you know what I mean. Free Guinness birthday top hats and goofy glasses will also be handed out while they last.

✚ **Albany Police Pipes and Drums Drumming up Support for All-Ireland Pipe Band Competition** The Albany Police Pipes and Drums will mark their 25th Anniversary in 2010. This will be a major milestone for the band, and to celebrate this event, the band will compete at the All-Ireland Pipe Band Championships to be held on Saturday, July 3, 2010 in the Town of Ballina, County Mayo. Albany recently won the grade 5 pipe band competition at the Great American Irish Festival. To raise money for this trip, the band will be selling raffle tickets, with a Grand Prize of \$5,000, the equivalent of a "Trip for Two to Ireland." Second prize is \$500 and third prize is \$250. The drawing will be held on Saturday, May 8, 2010. Pat O'Hara, a member of both the pipe band and the festival board of directors, will be selling the raffle tickets and band T-shirts. If you would like to purchase either, please contact him at [pipeband@gaif.us](mailto:pipeband@gaif.us). For more details, visit [www.capitaldistrictpolicepipesndrums.com](http://www.capitaldistrictpolicepipesndrums.com).

✚ **And if Gambling's Not Your Thing...** Tour Northern Ireland for 10 days from May 19-29, 2010. See sites such as the Guinness Storehouse, St Patrick's Cathedral, Newgrange, Belfast, Giant's Causeway, Bushmill's Distillery, Derry, Belleek China, Donegal, and much more. If you were part of the November 2008 tour (as were several GAIF people), you already know this will be a well-organized trip, with lots of free time built in, and – if our luck holds – the most entertaining driver/tour guide imaginable. For the complete itinerary please contact Celia at JRP Travel by calling (315)796-8671 or emailing her at [celia@jrptravel.com](mailto:celia@jrptravel.com).

✚ **Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author Dies** Frank McCourt, an American-Irish teacher and a Pulitzer Prize winning author, passed away on May 19th. McCourt, the son of Irish immigrants, was born in Brooklyn, NY in 1930. Unable to find work in the USA during The Great Depression, McCourt's father moved the family back to their native Limerick, Ireland where they sank deeper into poverty. Frank's father eventually relocated to wartime Liverpool, England, taking jobs in factories and leaving his family to fend for themselves. Frank quit school at 13 and took whatever work he could find. At 19, McCourt returned to the US and was soon drafted into the army. After his discharge, he obtained his master's degree from Brooklyn College and taught in New York City schools for 30 years. As his teaching career was winding down, he began writing books such as "Teacher Man," "Tis" and the acclaimed "Angela's Ashes," which was eventually made into a film. Frank McCourt was a true family man, a really nice guy, and a wonderful success story. He'll certainly be missed [*borrowed from the Hair of the Dog website*].

**Celtic Club Calendar** Finally, here's the Irish Musical and Cultural calendar for August.

July 31	Piggy Pat's Postpartum Party w/The Blarney Rebel Band	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	6-9 PM	Free
July 31	Hair of the Dog	<a href="#">The Parting Glass</a>	Saratoga Springs	9:00 PM	\$13
July 31	Donal O'Shaughnessy	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9 PM	Free
Aug 1	Gerry Dixon	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9 PM	Free
Aug 2	<a href="#">Syracuse Irish Session</a>	Wayside Irish Pub	Elbridge NY	4-7 PM	Free
Aug 3	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">The Susquehanna Café</a>	Bainbridge NY	5:30-8:30 PM	Free
Aug 4	"Nail Creek Sessions" w/Craobh Dugan branch	<a href="#">Nail Creek Pub</a>	Utica	7:30-10 PM	Free
Aug 7	Donal O'Shaughnessy	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	6-9 PM	Free
Aug 7	The McKrells	<a href="#">The Parting Glass</a>	Saratoga Springs	9 PM	Free
Aug 8	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	2-5 PM	Free
Aug 8	<a href="#">CNY Scottish Games and Celtic Festival</a>	Long Branch Park	Liverpool, NY	9 AM - 6 PM	Adults \$10, Srs \$7, Kids 5-12 \$4; under 5 free
Aug 9	Donal O'Shaughnessy	<a href="#">Coleman's Irish Pub</a>	Syracuse	4-7 PM	Free
Aug 10	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">The Susquehanna Café</a>	Bainbridge NY	5:30-8:30 PM	Free
Aug 10	Daniel O'Donnell	Times-Union Center	Albany	2 PM	\$57-\$87
Aug 14	Blarney Rebel Band	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	6-9 PM	Free
Aug 14	Seven Nations	<a href="#">The Parting Glass</a>	Saratoga Springs	9:30 PM	Free
Aug 15	Blarney Rebel Band	Celtic Harp	Utica	7 PM	Free
Aug 15-16	<a href="#">International Celtic Festival</a>	Hunter Mountain	Hunter, NY	12-11 PM Sat; 11 to 9 PM Sun	\$14, 12 & under free
Aug 16	<a href="#">Syracuse Irish Session</a>	Johnston's Bally Bay Pub	Syracuse	4-7 PM	Free
Aug 17	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">The Susquehanna Café</a>	Bainbridge NY	5:30-8:30 PM	Free
Aug 21	Frank Cannistra	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	6-9 PM	Free
Aug 21	The TownPants	<a href="#">The Parting Glass</a>	Saratoga Springs	9 PM	Free
Aug 21	Searson	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9 PM	Free
Aug 21-22	<a href="#">Cortland Celtic Festival</a>	Courthouse Park	Cortland NY	Check <a href="#">web site</a>	Free
Aug 22	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	2-5 PM	Free
Aug 22	Donal O'Shaughnessy	<a href="#">Kitty Hoynes</a>	Syracuse	9 PM	Free
Aug 24	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">The Susquehanna Café</a>	Bainbridge NY	5:30-8:30 PM	Free
Aug 28	Blarney Rebel Band	<a href="#">Piggy Pat's Pickled Pig Pub</a>	Washington Mills	6-9 PM	Free
Aug 28-30	<a href="#">Buffalo Irish Festival</a>	The Grove at the Hamburg Fairgrounds	Hamburg, NY	Fri 5-11; Sat 12-11; Sun 12-9	\$12 Adults; \$10 for kids 4-12 and 60+
Aug 30	Flyin' Column	<a href="#">Coleman's Irish Pub</a>	Syracuse	4-7 PM	Free
Aug 31	Trad Irish Music Session	<a href="#">The Susquehanna Café</a>	Bainbridge NY	5:30-8:30 PM	Free

That wraps it up for this month. While we do plan a 2<sup>nd</sup> installment of GAIF recaps next month, here's your chance to chime in as well. Do you have a favorite story or festival memory you want to share? Comments about a particular band? Maybe you took some great pictures with one of your idols? If you have anything you want to share with the committee – including suggestions or even criticisms (hey, it could happen) -- feel free to send them to us ([sistia@roadrunner.com](mailto:sistia@roadrunner.com), [bloftis@verizon.net](mailto:bloftis@verizon.net) or [marksisti@roadrunner.com](mailto:marksisti@roadrunner.com)) and we'll be sure to pass them on. As always, while we try to get things – prices, places, times, genders, etc., -- as accurate as we can, sometimes we make mistakes. It always makes sense to call ahead to confirm some of these further-out trips.