



Reflections of a River Rat:

House was a rockin' on our memorable July Fourth

By Jim Holleran

Stevie Ray Vaughan's lyrics capture my family's most memorable July Fourth in Morristown.

"Yeah the house is a rockin' don't bother knockin'."

Our 1890s-circa house on the bend along Main Street, a couple of doors away from Wright's Marina with a postcard view of the St. Lawrence River, did rock. But like a veteran heavyweight, it showed it could take a punch and still stand.

The story comes to mind each year when our hometown stops to celebrate Independence Day. The Morristown Fire Department plans a modest gala this July Fourth weekend with a craft fair, antique car parade, drive-through chicken barbecue and its signature fireworks display.

But the annual celebration won't rise to the level of the past 50 or 60 years with a parade of high school bands from Morristown, Heuvelton, Lisbon and Ogdensburg, fire departments and a fleet of rescue vehicles, the clip-clop of horses, politicians throwing candy to children, and an assortment of floats, clowns, bicycles and boats.

It seemed that half the North Country would swell the town's population those parade days along Main Street. People took the day off from work, high school and family reunions were held, picnics were planned at cottages, children carried bottles of soda and paper trays of fried dough sprinkled with powdered sugar, and the Holleran household was a traditional draw for friends to visit.

My brothers and sisters reasoned in 1997 that it was the perfect opportunity to host a surprise retirement party for Eileen Holleran. At age 69, she had gathered a lifetime of friends during a 47-year nursing career in labor and delivery at A. Barton Hepburn Hospital in Ogdensburg and seemingly had a hand in thousands of births.



The only catch: she would never agree to a party. She disliked being the center of attention. She had learned years ago it was convenient to linger silently in the background when people criticized her husband's coaching strategies or her children. She was never a "notice me" type, but she still ruled the roost. We didn't cross her. She didn't swear routinely and make a longshoreman blush. But she had some colorful phrases. Let me clean this up with one of her gentler utterances. She was found of quoting from Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!"

Regardless, the stealthy planning commenced. Someone sprinkled the party details and a few shamrocks onto a flyer. We hid tables and chairs under the deck. We stashed some food at St. John the Evangelist parish center. My only job was to keep my big fat Irish mouth shut.

We would have to break it to her that about 100 friends and acquaintances would be descending for a lawn party, but we couldn't reach a consensus on who was going to tempt the wrath of Eileen. By parade day, we had devised our strategy. When she returned upstairs to her bedroom, alone, we would send up my daughter Katie with the flyer. How could Grandma Holleran get peeved at her sweet, innocent, 11-year-old with Down syndrome? Her conscience wouldn't permit it.



Of course, everyone made themselves busy. Maureen lingered at her camp with four children to shepherd. Mary Nora slipped off to the parish center – “I got out of Dodge” – on the premise that she had to check on the food. Fran? Matt? Anne Marie? Everyone else had scattered.

Katie trudged upstairs. Silence. Downstairs came Florence of the St. Lawrence.

Recalled Fran’s wife, Mary Jo: “We all tried to look the other way. I didn’t want to make eye contact because I’m not even blood.”

It worked. She came downstairs, grumbled only a bit, then announced she had to change out of her jeans and T-shirt. It seemed too easy. It wasn’t.

Strike One! -- The only factor out of our control was the weather. It began to shower. The marchers were undaunted. They sallied forth through the raindrops. We left the chairs and tables under the deck. When the action on the street ended, the parade into the house began. Friends and neighbors crowded in. The rain persisted.

Strike Two! -- Soon the house was a rockin’. Drinks were distributed. Plates were heaped with potato salad and cold cuts. Stories were told. Laughter permeated the house. Then there was a loud cracking sound, followed by dead silence. It felt

like everyone in the living room had jumped in unison. For a brief moment, we thought the floor was going to collapse. Upon further review, we discovered a post had collapsed in the basement.

That was when Mary Nora and John Klenovic's friends from Florida got their first taste of North Country kindness. Harry Ott was a longtime construction manager at Charlotte County (Fla.) schools, where John and Mary, and Mary Jo and Fran, all worked. He and his wife, Dorothy, were passing through the North Country so stopping in Morristown on parade day was a given.

When the floor slipped, Jim Spilman handed the keys to Morristown Fuel & Supply to his son, Paul, Anne Marie's husband. Paul and Harry prowled through the warehouse, found the correct post, then jacked up the floor and installed it in a jiffy. Crisis averted. The house was still rockin' but the floors were stable.

Strike Three! – Someone whispered that we were running low on booze. The stereotype for an Irish household was that we never ran out. I still remember the Irish wake we had when my father died 15 years earlier. We held the Mass on the front lawn of the church, walked to the cemetery, then returned down Main Street where a tent was erected in the backyard for guests. A neighbor's child gasped aloud: "Wow, their Dad died and they're having a big party!"

Josephine Colburn overhead the air of desperation in the chatter and reached into her pocket. Soon, the keys to her liquor store were lobbed across the living room. "Go get what you need," she volunteered magnanimously.

At that point, Harry Ott might have wet himself: "I couldn't believe it. First, the guy from the fuel supply hands over his keys. Then the woman from the liquor store. I'd never seen such kindness. These people were incredible."

Dropped Third Strike (Play Continues)! – The party lasted ... and lasted. Eileen got the party she deserved. Her sisters and a couple of Murphy cousins to this day grumble that they weren't invited, but we had more guests than we could handle. At some point, we collected the trash and the rain stopped. We retired to the screened deck to recap what we had pulled off, tell stories and watch the lights of Brockville shimmer across the water's expanse. That was when Mary Nora delivered the line of the day.

"Mary Frances, while you're up, could you pour me a glass of that Chil-awb-lay?"

Mary Frances, a necessity when there is Mary Nora, Mary Brigid and Mary Jo also in the room, hunted through the refrigerator, searching for a fancy bottle of imported wine. She couldn't locate it.

Mary Nora traipsed to the refrigerator and found it immediately. Mary Frances looked in, wondering how she missed it. There was a box of Franzia Chillable Red. Thus was born the legend of Chil-awb-lay. It had been a good party.

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