



Reflections of a River Rat:

Sorry St. Patrick, you banished snakes,
but there's a pandemic still going on

Mary and I had a brief moment of clarity this week when we decided our annual St. Patrick's Day party had become a victim of the pandemic for the third consecutive year.

Since 1985, we have thrown open our doors, turned on the Irish music, cooked corned beef, iced the beer, uncorked a few bottles of wine and spirits, and

welcomed as many as 145 guests into our home.

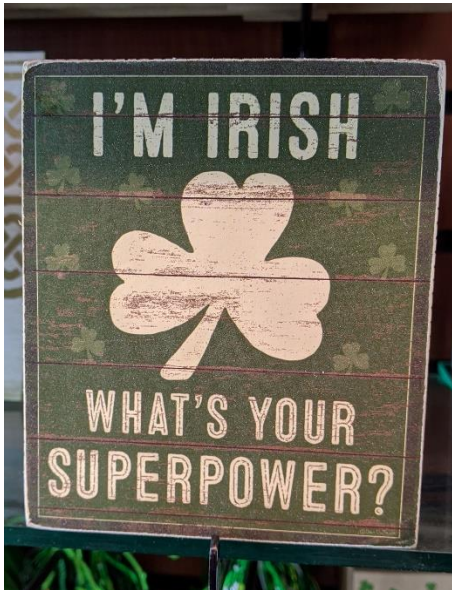
The party embodies all the aspects of being a good neighbor, of celebrating our heritage, but sadly it promotes the spread of a deadly virus.

We realized it wasn't a sound idea for so many to huddle in an enclosed space. So like the Buffalo Bills (1993), or worse, the Cleveland Indians (1954), we'll wait another year and hope things get better.

We'll still see many of our friends throughout the year, we'll still send out the sarcastic Christmas letter or cross paths at the

supermarket, but we'll miss the party humor as we crowd into the kitchen. In a weird way, I'll miss the comparisons of my golf swing to Zorro, the analysis of how the Bills blew the final 13 seconds of the KC playoff game, the annual retelling by my friend Tom of how I called a travelling violation against his daughter, although she was pushed and fractured her elbow.

March 17 will fall on a Thursday next month. We have always insisted on gathering on the date. Whether we were living in the city or suburbs, we wouldn't wait until a Friday or Saturday, or stage it the weekend before like the downtown parade. It always happened on the 17th. We'd buy 35 pounds of corned beef, hot dogs or pasta for the wee ones, and accept four starter cases of beer from my generous friend at Genesee Brewing. Perhaps someone would jump on the piano.





Our lifelong friends -- Chuck and Terry Crow and Leo Roth join Mary and I outside the front door on St. Patrick's Day. Our friendships date to Buffalo State College in 1979, through The News-Herald in suburban Cleveland, and Democrat and Chronicle in Rochester.

We'd draw a cross-section of folks from the neighborhood, newspaper, church, the Penfield Irish Mafia, sports connections, the city schools and Rochester Area Community Foundation. The coincidences and associations always made for good storytelling:

- Longtime Gannett movie reviewer Jack Garner and Buffalo Bills training camp director John Broomfield passed each other on the stairs one evening, pausing to exchange hellos. They had lived on the same floor 40 years ago at St. Bonaventure.
- Our friend, Sharon, stopped our friend, Claire, and they exchanged OMGs. Claire had been her Girl Scout troop leader ages ago, long before Sharon began raising her three children.
- Katie's nurse, Pat, and a teaching colleague, Kathy, shared a similar moment. It turns out they were neighbors in tiny Olcott, NY, 50 years earlier.

- The kitchen is always crowded, but what are the chances of assembling seven sports junkies named Jim – Babiarz, Combs, Gertner, Malloy, Mickles, Nugent and Holleran.



There will be no need to light the house again this year.

The party headcount began when a newsroom colleague moaned how his son's white, New York Giants coat was so filthy, so unrecognizable that he must have picked up another child's jacket. We scribbled down the names of everyone we could recall and came up with 100 guests, but nobody had a son that size, or with a white coat. The little guy had muddied it shooting hoops in the driveway during the spring thaw.

That little exercise led us to our annual post mortem head count. That's how we confirmed our record year of 145.

We've also collected humorous anecdotes. A short man with a white beard wandered down Genesee Park Boulevard and arrived at the front door. He resembled an aging Notre Dame leprechaun who slipped out of a nursing home.

"Is this still the O'Malley's house?" he asked longingly.

“No, I’m not sure anyone by the name ever lived here,” I said, then paused.
“But would like to join us?”

“Oh, that would be wonderful.”

He floated between conversations in the living room, then about an hour later, he slipped out the backdoor and into the night never to be seen again.

Our friend, Missy, was about to give birth about 25 years ago, when Mary suggested, “One beer can’t hurt.” She left early before her husband, Jack, arrived from the copy desk. He had about one beer before his phone rang. It was Missy, announcing it was time to rush off for the birth of their third child, appropriately named Erin.

My brother Fran and sister-in-law Mary Jo get the prize for coming the farthest. At the height of the party in 2016, Fran squeezed through the kitchen and inquired, “You out of corned beef yet?” They conspired with our daughter Claire and flew in 1,500 miles from Florida.

We had the recreation of the scene from “It’s A Wonderful Life” too. We just set another record when the party ended at 5:45 a.m. March 18, an hour before dawn on an unusually warm morning. Our windows were open as I crawled into bed, but I heard voices in the driveway below. The best man from our wedding was trying to sweet talk an attractive young copy editor. After 15 minutes, I was tempted to play that man on the porch who interrupts Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. “Why don’t you kiss her instead of talking her to death!” I refrained, and we all remained friends.

The most bizarre scene happened the year we bought our corned beef on a Saturday. The party remained 4-5 days away, but vendors sell out early because the demand ceases after parade day. We were on our third market, and a circuitous drive around the parade route, when we picked up our corned beef. Liam stowed it in the back seat, then loaded it into the garage refrigerator.

One party day, The Calamity of 2010, I took a call from Ed Driscoll, announcing an impromptu wake for our dear friend Kevin O’Reilly at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, just down the street from my school and 30 minutes from home. I arrived around 4 p.m. to find Ed parked in a lawn chair with a six-pack of Guinness.

I knew I was in trouble when the phone rang 20 minutes later. I had promised Mary to bolt home immediately after school. Sure enough, it was Mary, almost in tears. “The corned beef turned brown!” she said. “Something’s wrong. I saved the packaging, but I know something’s wrong.”



By the time I landed at party central, our good friend, Martin O'Donnell, went to the supermarket on a rescue mission and managed to talk a clerk into finding about 10 pounds of corned beef in the storeroom. We cooked it immediately.

At home, I examined the packaging. The teen-aged clerk had unwittingly handed Liam beef brisket, prompting my friend Tom to announce, “Don’t you just love coming to Hollerans on St. Patrick’s Day for a roast beef sandwich.”

Now I wasn’t feeling so bad that I blew the call against his daughter.

Last July 17th, we tried for a summer, outdoor St. Patrick’s Day party during the pandemic lull, but the fairies and weather gods conspired against us. Two inches of unrelenting rain fell, and everyone was huddled inside or under a tent on the back deck.

The idea was to share craic (pronounced crack), an Irish term for the moment a party is buzzing with conversation, music and humor. Turns out our decision was cracked.

Maybe we’ll try again this summer, or wait until next year.

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