

Irish stories on tap at O'Connor House



Jim Coyle
GTA View

It's always a tricky business, for those who know their bodhran from their baklava, a shebeen from a shwama, to decide exactly when and how to mark this time of year.

There's a wish, of course, to give due nod to St. Patrick, but a keen desire not to be drowned in the green wave of kiss-me-I'm-Irish kitsch.

The folks raising money for O'Connor Irish Heritage House on Rowena Dr. at Victoria Park and Ellesmere obviously decided that, by last night, it was probably safe to come out for those with Irish blood in their veins, Irish sensibility in their souls, and a respect for the place

the Irish have in building this city.

They had planned an Irish Night fundraiser down at the Famous People Players on Stubby St., hoping to help restore and refurbish a piece of Toronto's architectural history as a centre of Irish culture, heritage and learning.

Naturally, the Irish being Irish, the building in question has a good story behind it. It was about — can you credit this? — a rich man who gave all his money away.

Anyway, Mary Fay, chair of the O'Connor House committee, was happy to tell it the other day.

It seems Francis Patrick O'Connor, whose family had come from County Cork, was born in 1885 and grew up Peterborough. Now, as many young men of like origins did, he left school in his teens to work in a factory. In 1913, he and his wife came to Toronto and opened a candy store at the corner of Yonge and Elm.

It was reportedly Mrs. O'Con-

nor, if truth be known, who decided to name the business the Laura Second Candy Co., after the heroine of the War of 1812. She liked the idea, the story goes, of something distinctly Canadian.

Well, the rest is history. A sweet fortune was made from Laura Second and from Fanny Farmer candies when O'Connor expanded into the U.S. He soon bought a 600-acre farm on what was then countryside northeast of the city, where he raised racehorses and cattle. In 1933, he built a Colonial Revival mansion on the grounds.

But the story, as most good ones do, took an unusual twist. O'Connor — decent and forward-looking man that he was — believed his employees had played a large role in his success. So on the company's 10th anniversary, he announced a profit-sharing scheme. Then, in the 1930s, the man for whom O'Connor Dr. was named began giving his money away to churches, schools and charities.

He endowed hospitals and community centres. He paid off the outstanding debt of the Archdiocese of Toronto.

Not, of course, that there weren't rewards for some of his beneficence as a supporter of the Liberal Party. In 1935, O'Connor was appointed to the Senate by a grateful William Lyon Mackenzie King.

In 1939, O'Connor died at 54 in the mansion he had built. The premiers of Ontario and Quebec attended his funeral. He left most of his estate to charities and the farm to the De La Salle Brothers (the taxes paid for 20 years).

For about 60 years, the building remained in their hands as schools eventually named in O'Connor's honour were established. Then, it was acquired by the Toronto Catholic District School Board. When the board planned to demolish and replace the high school a few years back, the mansion was supposed to be razed with it.

But along came Mary Fay, who

works in the board's accounting department.

Her committee has raised about \$50,000 of the \$250,000 needed to acquire and establish the mansion as a centre for Irish education and culture. Most of it has come in small donations from individuals and families, she says, and the raising of another \$100,000 will allow the committee to access matching funds from the province's Trillium Foundation and another \$100,000 or so that the board had originally earmarked for demolition costs.

Paul Farrelly, a past head of the Ireland Fund of Canada, said Fay has been instrumental to the campaign and O'Connor House "would have been torn down by now except for her."

Instead, the hopes is that its rafters "will ring again with music, dance, discourse and gatherings ... inspired by the generosity of spirit of its founder." There would be the Irish being Irish, speaker series and, the times being what they are, educational

webcasts, he said.

Of course, the times are different now. The Irish aren't flung by poverty and persecution to the four corners of the globe. The economic miracle of the Celtic Tiger has transformed the country in ways unimaginable to those who left even 20 years ago, such that the one-way tickets bought nowadays are by Irish heading home.

But the astonishing resilience of a singular people, often arriving on a "sorrowful pilgrimage," helped build this city of immigrants.

"The Canadian immigrant will, with time, lose many of the peculiarities of his race," predicted the historian William Canniff.

Perhaps. But in the case of the Irish, race memory runs long and deep, and there are stories to be preserved and passed on. O'Connor House sounds like a splendid place for the telling.

Jim Coyle usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.