

## Pat the Yank

For almost 150 years Ireland's three main exports were people, potatoes and priests – in descending order of importance! Beginning with the “Great Famine” of 1845, 1846 and 1847, the population of Ireland plummeted from eight million to four million people, through starvation and emigration. The infamous “Coffin Ships” took the travelers across the Atlantic in the dark bowels of vessels which had long since passed their prime. Many did not survive the trip, but for those who did, “Amerikay” was the land of freedom and opportunity. The vast bulk of them never again saw Ireland; hence, the invention of the “American Wake.” We Irish have long been famous for our wakes, three-day affairs that snubbed the nose at death and defied it to do its damndest; we would not be cowed, demoralized or beaten into submission. Nay, rather, we would celebrate death with music, food, clay pipes, alcohol and dancing, and even the corpse was expected to participate in that latter activity. “Breakfast at Bernie's” is but an insipid imitation of an Irish wake.

When it became obvious that emigration to America was a final farewell to the “Emerald Isle,” we came up with the American wake. It had all the trappings of your normal wake, except that the “corpse” (emigrant-to-be) was expected to participate in the music, the food, the clay pipes (dudeens) and alcohol, and not just the dancing.

Almost none of them ever came back. Instead they would regularly send letters and money to support the family at home and to pay the ship's fare for the next wave of emigrants. They wrote songs and poems, short stories and novels about the “auld sod,” and they cried salty tears into pint glasses of brown ale, but almost none of them ever came home again. None, that is, except “Pat the Yank.” Pat the Yank was in his late 70's when I first met him, at age four in 1950. He lived on our street, and was only called “Pat the Yank” behind his back, though I suspect he knew about it and wouldn't have minded particularly if his

birth certificate were altered to reflect this new sobriquet. Pat had gone to America at the turn of the century when he was in his 20's. They gave him one hell of a wake, and off he went to vomit up his guts in the belly of a tramp steamer and make his fortune where the very streets are paved with gold. And he did fairly well, but a year was enough for him, and home he came shortly after the first anniversary of his wake to settle down and spend the rest of his life in the town of his birth. He quickly established himself as the resident guru on all things American. Whether your question was about politics, geography, history, style of clothes or modes of transport, at the other side of the Atlantic, Pat was your man. And so he became known as "Pat the Yank." This started off as a cynical comment on the fact that he wasn't able to survive the States, but as his audiences grew in size and longevity, it was spoken with genuine admiration.

A typical evening would find Pat seated at his own fireside, pipe in mouth, his wife sitting across the hearth from him knitting a "gansey" (sweater) for one of their 35 grandchildren, and 12 or 15 locals on chairs, stools or haunches listening to his stories and plying him with questions.

I remember one such evening. Somebody asked, "Pat, tell me this and tell me no more, is the pace of life very fast in America?" Pat threw the questioner a pitying glance, took the pipe out of his mouth, squirted tobacco-colored spittle into the glowing turf, where it sizzled like a newly-arrived sinner in hell, and replied, "Fast? Fast is it, you ask? I'll tell you about 'fast.' It's not like us here, God love us. Take the Cork County Council for instance. You see a pothole in the road, small enough to step over. The Council sends out five men to review the situation. These boys will convene around it, discuss it, debate it, draw sketches with their shovels and then break for tea. After an hour, they'll assemble again and approach the problem from another angle, discussing the pros, but mainly the cons. Then they'll break for lunch. Lunch is always a leisurely affair and could take up to two hours to let the repast settle comfortably in the stomach. Then they're back at their task tackling some heretofore unrecognized difficulty in the job. Everybody will have to have his say, and that will

carry them comfortably to the afternoon teatime, which will last for another hour. By the time that break is over, 'tis hardly worth getting serious about the job, cause now 'tis only half an hour to quitting time. So, reluctantly, they gather up their shovels and bid a good evening to the pothole, promising to 'be back bright and early tomorrow morning.' True to their word 'bright and early' at 9:45 a.m. they're at the task again, brainstorming, pooh-poohing each other's suggestions and determined not to actually begin filling in the pothole until they achieve consensus. This process will take all of the first week. Now they're ready for action. They spit in their hands, grab their shovels and to a man they agree it's now time to go fetch the gravel and the tar. Bringing these items to the site, however, is never straightforward. The size of the gravel has to be calculated depending on the number of donkey-and-carts that use that particular section of roadway; the prevailing winds have to be taken into account; and the altitude factored in. But definitely by the end of the second week all materials have been assembled. Now it's a 'flurry-of-activity' time. The pothole is so small that only one man can work at a time while the others lean on their shovels, shouting advice, criticism and encouragement – all at the same time. In the course of these exertions, one of them is bound to 'put out his back,' and the job abandoned while they all take him down to the 'North Infirmary' debating the likely 'workmen's compensation' that will come of it. The hole may now stand abandoned for several months, welcoming cart wheels into its ever-burgeoning maw. Eventually, the original group may come back, only to decide that it is now far too big a job for a team of five. Intense negotiations with 'the gaffer' over the next week will finally result in a generously increased bunch of commandoes, fortified by 'danger money,' because anything could happen in attempting to tackle a chasm of this size. Six months have now gone by and all the gravel has been stolen by little boys as ammunition for their catapults. Hanam an diabhail (my soul to the devil) but a Council worker's job is never done!"

Here Pat the Yank spat once more into the fire, sucked a few times on his pipe and then continued, "Well, I can tell you one thing for nothing, it's not like

that in the United States of Amerikay.” I remember one morning, ‘twas about 6:20 a.m. and I was passing through Manhattan on my way to work. There was an almighty gang of men digging a hole in the ground. They told me ‘twas the foundations for a brand-new skyscraper. They had diggers and dumpsters, excavators and lorries, trucks and wheelbarrows, steel cables and cement bags, lumber (that’s what the yanks call timber), hosepipes and concrete blocks. There were guys scurrying up and scurrying down, gaffers (a whole bunch of them), shouting orders in several different languages and one geezer with a set of plans that looked like the Book of Kells. I’m telling you I was impressed, but I couldn’t stand idly about for hadn’t I work to do myself? So off I went, and that day I got some overtime, so I didn’t get home until nearly 10 o’clock that night. I passed along the same street in Manhattan and I declare to the Lord God almighty, they had the skyscraper finished! Done; all 100 floors of it! There were even people already *living* in it. Well, just as I was passing the front door of it, I saw this poor “angashore” (pitiful type) being thrown out on the sidewalk. I sez to him, ‘whazza matter, buddy?’ He sez, ‘Oh, I’m after getting evicted because I’m in arrears with my rent.’ That’s America for you! Fast? You have no idea in God’s green Earth what fast is, until you spend time in the States!”

And he stuck the pipe in his gob and looked nostalgically into the flames, imagining, no doubt, how his fortune might have grown to millionaire proportions, if it weren’t for the fact that he had chosen instead to come back to Erin to educate the natives.