Ireland's Myths and Legends

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Ireland is country with countless tales of myth and folklore. But none are more often repeated than the tales of leprechauns, selkies and the banshees.

Leprechauns Guard Irish Treasure

The Leprechaun is perhaps the most famous of all Irish legends. Said to be a type of fairy, the Leprechaun is a cobbler, making the shoes of all other fairy folk. Usually depicted as an old and bearded man, Leprechauns are never female. Legend tells that when the Danes invaded Ireland, the fairies hid all there treasure from the marauding hordes. The Leprechauns were given the task of guarding the treasure. Unfortunately, the rainbow always points to the location of the leprechauns treasure, so he must constantly be moving the trove. And with the climate in Ireland and plenty of rain, the rainbows are plentiful! It is said that if you catch a Leprechaun, he must either give you his treasure or grant you three wishes. The image and legend of the Irish Leprechaun has endured the ages and is very prevalent in western society today.

Selkies and Mermaids

The legend of the Selkie is very similar to the mermaid. But Selkies are brown seals by day and human by night. The legend comes from the numerous seals inhabiting the Irish coast. Sailors who caught a Selkie at night in human form married these lovely brown eyed maidens. For the rest of their lives, they would serve as patient wives, while constantly looking to the sea. If Selkies we
released by their captors, they would return to the sea but would forever more guard human families while on the sea, and on land.

**The Cry of the Banshee**

Banshee is another name for a Irish Fairy Woman. Tied to earthly families or clans, the banshee stands watch over their clans. When a member of the clan or family dies, the Banshee cries and mourns the death. Original legends do not have the Banshee coming to take the living, but mourning the death of a human family member. Banshees are depicted as both old ugly women and young attractive girls.

### St. Patrick's Day

St. Patrick’s Day is celebrated on March 17, the saint’s religious feast day and the anniversary of his death in the fifth century. The Irish have observed this day as a religious holiday for over 1,000 years. On St. Patrick’s Day, which falls during the Christian season of Lent, Irish families would traditionally attend church in the morning and celebrate in the afternoon. Lenten prohibitions against the consumption of meat were waived and people would dance, drink and feast--on the traditional meal of Irish bacon and cabbage.

### St. Patrick and the First St. Patrick’s Day Parade

Saint Patrick, who lived during the fifth century, is the patron saint and national apostle of Ireland. Born in Roman Britain, he was kidnapped and brought to Ireland as a slave at the age of 16. He later escaped, but returned to Ireland and was credited with bringing Christianity to its people. In the centuries following Patrick’s death (believed to have been on March 17, 461), the mythology surrounding his life became ever more ingrained in the Irish culture: Perhaps the most well known legend is that he explained the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy
Spirit) using the three leaves of a native Irish clover, the shamrock.

Since around the ninth or 10th century, people in Ireland have been observing the Roman Catholic feast day of St. Patrick on March 17. Interestingly, however, the first parade held to honor St. Patrick’s Day took place not in Ireland but in the United States. On March 17, 1762, Irish soldiers serving in the English military marched through New York City. Along with their music, the parade helped the soldiers reconnect with their Irish roots, as well as with fellow Irishmen serving in the English army.

**Growth of St. Patrick's Day Celebrations**

Over the next 35 years, Irish patriotism among American immigrants flourished, prompting the rise of so-called "Irish Aid" societies like the Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick and the Hibernian Society. Each group would hold annual parades featuring bagpipes (which actually first became popular in the Scottish and British armies) and drums.

In 1848, several New York Irish Aid societies decided to unite their parades to form one official New York City St. Patrick’s Day Parade. Today, that parade is the world’s oldest civilian parade and the largest in the United States, with over 150,000 participants. Each year, nearly 3 million people line the 1.5-mile parade route to watch the procession, which takes more than five hours. Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and Savannah also celebrate the day with parades involving between 10,000 and 20,000 participants each.

**St. Patrick's Day, No Irish Need Apply and the "Green Machine"**

Up until the mid-19th century, most Irish immigrants in America were members of the Protestant middle class. When the Great Potato Famine hit Ireland in 1845, close to 1 million poor and uneducated Irish Catholics began pouring into America to escape starvation. Despised for their alien religious beliefs and unfamiliar accents by the American Protestant majority, the immigrants had trouble finding even menial jobs. When Irish Americans in the country’s cities took to the streets on St. Patrick’s Day to celebrate their heritage, newspapers portrayed them in cartoons as drunk, violent monkeys.
The American Irish soon began to realize, however, that their large and growing numbers endowed them with a political power that had yet to be exploited. They started to organize, and their voting block, known as the "green machine," became an important swing vote for political hopefuls. Suddenly, annual St. Patrick’s Day parades became a show of strength for Irish Americans, as well as a must-attend event for a slew of political candidates. In 1948, President Harry S. Truman attended New York City's St. Patrick’s Day parade, a proud moment for the many Irish Americans whose ancestors had to fight stereotypes and racial prejudice to find acceptance in the New World.

The Chicago River on St. Patrick's Day

As Irish immigrants spread out over the United States, other cities developed their own traditions. One of these is Chicago's annual dyeing of the Chicago River green. The practice started in 1962, when city pollution-control workers used dyes to trace illegal sewage discharges and realized that the green dye might provide a unique way to celebrate the holiday. That year, they released 100 pounds of green vegetable dye into the river--enough to keep it green for a week! Today, in order to minimize environmental damage, only 40 pounds of dye are used, and the river turns green for only several hours.

Although Chicago historians claim their city’s idea for a river of green was original, some natives of Savannah, Georgia (whose St. Patrick’s Day parade, the oldest in the nation, dates back to 1813) believe the idea originated in their town. They point out that, in 1961, a hotel restaurant manager named Tom Woolley convinced city officials to dye Savannah’s river green. The experiment didn’t exactly work as planned, and the water only took on a slight greenish hue. Savannah never attempted to dye its river again, but Woolley maintains (though others refute the claim) that he personally suggested the idea to Chicago’s Mayor Richard J. Daley.

St. Patrick’s Day Around the World

Today, people of all backgrounds celebrate St. Patrick’s Day, especially throughout the United States, Canada and Australia. Although North America is home to the largest productions, St. Patrick’s Day is celebrated in many other locations far from Ireland, including Japan, Singapore and Russia.
In modern-day Ireland, St. Patrick’s Day was traditionally been a religious occasion. In fact, up until the 1970s, Irish laws mandated that pubs be closed on March 17. Beginning in 1995, however, the Irish government began a national campaign to use interest in St. Patrick’s Day to drive tourism and showcase Ireland and Irish culture to the rest of the world. Today, approximately 1 million people annually take part in Ireland’s St. Patrick’s Festival in Dublin, a multi-day celebration featuring parades, concerts, outdoor theater productions and fireworks shows. http://www.history.com/topics/st-patrick’s-day

St. Patrick’s Day Pinch

School children have started a little tradition of their own. They pinch classmates who don’t wear green on this holiday. Wearing green is strictly a U.S. custom, as the color green is not popular in Ireland. Green is connected to the old green flag and a time when Ireland was not free. Green is also a color connected with hope and nature.

The Potato Famine

During the summer of 1845, a "blight of unusual character" devastated Ireland’s potato crop, the basic staple in the Irish diet. A few days after potatoes were dug from the ground, they began to turn into a slimy, decaying, blackish "mass of rottenness." Expert panels convened to investigate the blight’s cause suggested that it was the result of "static electricity" or the smoke that billowed from railroad locomotives or the "mortiferous vapours" rising from underground volcanoes. In fact, the cause was a fungus that had traveled from Mexico to Ireland.

"Famine fever"--cholera, dysentery, scurvy, typhus, and infestations of lice--soon spread through the Irish countryside. Observers reported seeing children crying with pain and looking "like skeletons, their features sharpened with hunger and their limbs wasted, so that there was little left but bones." Masses of bodies were buried without coffins, a few inches below the soil.

Over the next ten years, more than 750,000 Irish died and another 2 million left their homeland for Great Britain, Canada, and the United States. Within five years, the Irish population was reduced by a quarter.

The Irish potato famine was not simply a natural disaster. It was a product of social causes. Under British rule, Irish Catholics were prohibited from entering the professions or even purchasing land.
Instead, many rented small plots of land from absentee British Protestant landlords. Half of all landholdings were less than 5 acres in 1845.

Irish peasants subsisted on a diet consisting largely of potatoes, since a farmer could grow triple the amount of potatoes as grain on the same plot of land. A single acre of potatoes could support a family for a year. About half of Ireland’s population depended on potatoes for subsistence.

The inadequacy of relief efforts by the British Government worsened the horrors of the potato famine. Initially, England believed that the free market would end the famine. In 1846, in a victory for advocates of free trade, Britain repealed the Corn Laws, which protected domestic grain producers from foreign competition. The repeal of the Corn Laws failed to end the crisis since the Irish lacked sufficient money to purchase foreign grain.

In the spring of 1847, Britain adopted other measures to cope with the famine, setting up soup kitchens and programs of emergency work relief. But many of these programs ended when a banking crisis hit Britain. In the end, Britain relied largely on a system of work houses, which had originally been established in 1838, to cope with the famine. But these grim institutions had never been intended to deal with a crisis of such sweeping scope. Some 2.6 million Irish entered overcrowded workhouses, where more than 200,000 people died.

The Irish Potato Famine left as its legacy deep and lasting feelings of bitterness and distrust toward the British. Far from being a natural disaster, many Irish were convinced that the famine was a direct outgrowth of British colonial policies. In support of this contention, they noted that during the famine’s worst years, many Anglo-Irish estates continued to export grain and livestock to England. http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/irish_potato_famine.cfm
Blarney Stone

Blarney stone The Blarney Stone is a stone set in the wall of the Blarney Castle tower in the Irish village of Blarney. Kissing the stone is supposed to bring the kisser the gift of persuasive eloquence. The legend says that an old woman cast a spell on the stone to reward a king who had saved her from drowning. Kissing the stone while under the spell gave the king the ability to speak sweetly and convincingly. It's difficult reach the stone. Kissers have to lie on their back and bend backward or downward, holding iron bars for support.
The Republic of Ireland’s flag is made of three equal-sized rectangles of orange, white, and green (this type of flag is called a tricolor). The flag is twice as wide as it is tall. The green side is by the flagpole. This flag was first used in 1848.

The green color on the flag represents the native people of Ireland (most of whom are Roman Catholic). The orange color represents the British supporters of William of Orange who settled in Northern Ireland in the 17th century (most of whom are Protestant). The white in the center of the flag represents peace between these
two groups of people.

Information on Foods Eaten Today

- Ireland’s local produce such as meat is highly regarded, and being used in a new wave of cuisine which revisits Irish classics in gourmet settings. The surrounding sea, inland lakes and rivers offer fresh fish including salmon, trout, lobster, mussels, periwinkles and, of course, oysters, something Guinness was designed to accompany.

- Cookery schools have sprung up around the country, offering classes all year round, to smaller, informal courses run by enthusiastic chefs in rural restaurants. Soda bread, Dublin coddle (pork stew) and Irish stew are among the hearty dishes that can be perfected.

- Things to know: Table and self-service are both common. ‘Tea’ is often almost a full meal with sandwiches and cakes. Pubs, of which Ireland has plenty, are sometimes called ‘lounges’ or ‘bars’ and there is often a worded sign outside the premises rather than the traditional painted boards found in the UK. Pubs and bars have counter service. The measure used in Ireland for spirits is larger than that used in the UK - example an Irish double is equal to a triple in the UK.

- National specialties:
  - Dublin Bay prawns.
  - Oysters, served with soda bread.
  - Irish stew, traditionally made with mutton or old sheep, now mostly made with lamb or juicy beef, and usually served with potatoes, stock, onions, carrots and garlic.
  - Crubeens (pigs’ trotters).
  - Colcannon (a mixture of potatoes and cabbage cooked together).

- National drinks:
  - Irish coffee is popular (a glass of strong black coffee, brown sugar and whiskey with cream).
Tipping: The customary tip in Ireland is 10 to 12%. Many hotels and restaurants add this in the form of a service charge indicated on the menu or bill. It is not customary to tip in bars unless you have table service when a small tip is advised.

http://www.iexplore.com/dmap/Ireland/Dining