

# The Gallivanterers: 50 years and still going strong

By Robert Hughes Perrizo

Note: in Irish folk culture, high esteem is granted to people able to do their “party piece” such as singing, jigging, storytelling or performing instrumentals at social gatherings. One such gentleman known for all of these traits is Mr. Pat Gallivan of St. Paul.

As a teenager in the late 1950s, adventuresome Pat Gallivan took off with St. Paul buddies to experience first hand the folk music revival that was stirring in San Francisco. It changed his life forever.

“I got a job selling ladies’ shoes on the Barbary Coast in the day time,” he reminisced recently, “and hung out with folk singers at bars like Lefty O’Doul’s at night. What a time it was! Everybody was into sing-along music because it was so much fun!”

An older woman living in his apartment house gave him some lessons on the ukulele and Pat, a quick study, moved quickly to the six-string guitar and banjo. Soon, he was jamming with other groups — including the famed Kingston Trio. By the time he returned to work at his father’s restaurant in St. Paul in the fall, he was a seasoned performer.

“Dad heard me rehearsing with my friend Billy Conlan in the back room at Gallivan’s,” he said. “He saw that customers seem to enjoy eavesdropping on the music, and asked if we’d like to play on weekends to build some business from late evening diners. That’s how we got started.”

Come next March, Pat’s “Gallivanterers” Irish show band will celebrate its 50th year entertaining. Probably no other group in the region has done more to preserve Irish and traditional folk music during that period.

In the early days the band became known not only as the weekend band at Gallivan’s Restaurant, but also as popular apres’ ski performers Sunday nights at the Dalles House in Dresser, WI. That establishment was close by to the popular Trollhagen Ski Area, where Pat happened to be on the ski patrol.

When Pat took a spring ski vacation to Aspen, Colo., in the early 1960s, he took his banjo along. A piano player at the famed Abbey Cellar recognized Pat in the crowd one night and asked him to join him on stage.

“The next thing I knew,” Pat said, “I was asked to play some after-ski gigs at the Abbey, and that led me to meeting other well-known folk performers like John Denver, the Limelighters, the Irish Rovers and the Clancy Brothers (who his band fronted at several later St. Paul performances).”

Meanwhile, a couple of “earth-shaking” Irish events took place back at the famed roundtable at Gallivan’s Restaurant involving the Gallivanterers band. First, the Irish St. Patrick’s Day Parade was resurrected, giving St. Paul a most important civic event each year. On a Sunday of St. Patrick’s Day week, the band volunteered to play for three notable one-



The Gallivanterers, from left to right: Dan Radford, Ken Mahler, Pat Gallivan, Billy Conlon and Bill Weisner.

hour performances: at the Cancer Home, at the Bethany Home for Retired Nuns, and at the Little Sisters of the Poor.

“Just about the whole St. Paddy’s Day Committee takes part in this musical swing,” Pat said, “and it continues to this very day. It’s always the most important — and rewarding — gig the band does each year.”

A second decade’s old event that the band lends its spirit to is the zany “World’s Worst Irish Tenor Contest” that came about after another Gallivan’s Round Table confest.

“A couple of real characters — a Pioneer Press humor columnist named Bill Farmer and

banker named Glen Olson — came up with the worst tenor contest idea to spoof every Irishman’s love for good music,” Gallivan recalled. “And over the years, we’ve had people like squeaky Benny Jensen, a mail sorter from Hayward, Wisc. . . Mephisto the Fire Eater . . . A female hog caller . . . A female auctioneer . . . An Incredible Hulk impersonator, and a bunch of other equally bizarre people win the thing.”

The Worst Irish Tenor Contest supports the St. Patrick’s Day Committee activities.

Gallivan’s was sold in 1983, and Pat went on to pursue another passion — golf — and became a pro shop manager in Palm Springs, CA. Although he was gone from St. Paul for over a decade, he

maintained his involvement with the St. Patrick’s Day Parade and the World’s Worst Irish Tenor Contest at Mancini’s Restaurant each year. For the past several years, he has been back in his home city, still active running a golf pro shop and as a maitre’ de at the Pool and Yacht Club. As always, he performs with his band of 50 years.

The main group includes Pat Gallivan on banjo and guitar, Dan Radford on fiddle, Billy Conlan on guitar, Ken Mahler on accordion, and Bill Weisner on bass.

“It’s hard to believe we’ve stayed together that long,” he mused. “People still don’t seem to get enough of the old sing-along music. It’s as entertaining for us as it is for the people and the clubs we play at.”



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