



The Ceilíer

A Publication of the Pittsburgh Ceilí Club

"All The News We Want To Print"

Fall 2025

Getting to Know... the Pittsburgh Ceilí Club

When our club is dancing at a monthly ceili, or on a Tuesday night at the Harp & Fiddle, did you ever stop to wonder how all that fun got started?

I've always had an interest in history. Not so much dates and battles as people and places. And I've been curious for the past few years about the history of the Pittsburgh Ceilí Club. Whenever I wondered about how the club got started, everyone told me the same thing: You have to talk to Maureen Strotmeyer, Nan Pischke, Pete Shovlin, and Chuck and Eileen McHugh. Over the summer, I had the pleasure of interviewing all of those dear people at



some length. And I got a story of a group of people who were young in the 1980s and 90s and developed a passion for Irish dancing.

Unsurprisingly, the origins of the club go back to Ireland, where Pete Shovlin Jr. danced in the Irish Ballet in 1988. He came home with great enthusiasm for Irish ceili dancing, and announced on the Echoes of Erin radio program that he intended to offer lessons at Larry Cervi

Dance Studio in Wilkinsburg. Eight people attended

the first class, to taped music. Some early dancers were Kathleen O'Connor Byrnes (a cousin of Nan Pischke's), Maureen Strotmeyer, Nan Pischke, Rusty Petro, Lois and Jim Hickey, Dan McIntyre, Chuck and Eileen McHugh, Maureen Coonan, and Earl McCabe. And another name you might recognize: former Pittsburgh mayor Pete Flaherty once attended a lesson!



The Pittsburgh Ceilí Club was born in 1991, from this group of dancers. Pete (Shovlin not Flaherty!) initially ran the club. He'd grown up at the Irish Center, and knew the members of other Irish organizations but he felt strongly that Pittsburgh needed a club dedicated mainly to Irish dancing. In the early days, dances were held at Penn Café in Bloomfield, the Ukrainian Club, the Serbian Club, and Swisshelm Community Center. Music was from tape initially but live music soon became a must. Some of the first musicians at these early dances were Pete Shovlin Sr., Richard Withers, Mike Gallagher, Bruce Molyneaux, Oliver Brown, Ray Werner, Carla Dundas

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and Kathy Fallon.



Pete, Maureen, Kathleen and Nan ran the first ceilis at the Penn Café. Nan describes it as “filthy,” and remembers that she and Maureen had to clean the bathrooms. But it was free! Everyone brought food. And I’m told that Buddy the one-armed bartender could still sling around cases of beer.

Early board members included President Jim Hickey, Vice President Kathleen O’Connor Byrnes, Secretary Nan Pischke, and Treasurer Maureen Strotmeyer. Pete Shovlin Jr. also served on the board.

By 1992, Sean Patrick Murphy and Anne Mullaney had just bought a bar in the Strip District, Bal’s Ironworker Tavern, and were looking for programming for their bar, which they had renamed Mullaney’s Harp & Fiddle. They invited the Pittsburgh Ceili Club to dance there on Tuesday nights – a tradition that has lasted 33 years and counting! Brian Corr, Dan Sweeney, and Pete Shovlin Sr. were the original musicians at the Harp & Fiddle.



Remember that old line from Field of Dreams? “If you build it, they will come.” The club placed flyers in churches, and ads in newsletters, the Post Gazette and the City Paper. Membership grew quickly. The first Kickoff Ceili, held in the Vista Ballroom in 1993, attracted over 600 attendees.

The performing group started around 1994, including Maureen Strotmeyer, Nan Pischke, Margaret Murray, Don and Midge O’Rourke, Chuck and Eileen McHugh, and Jim and Lois Hickey. Their first costumes were black and white with green t-shirts, and they won a trophy!

The early members of the club were very enthusiastic, and Pete was exacting. Nan recalls that they had to learn the steps thoroughly before they danced, and commented that she lost thirty pounds practicing!

As it is now, so it was from the beginning: there were



always more women than men who wanted to dance. So, the best female dancers have always had to learn to dance the male part as well.

In the early days, club members took bus trips to other Irish festivals all over the northeastern United States, including the Poconos, the Catskills, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Dublin, Ohio. And, of course, there were shenanigans.

I heard about the time Dennis Murphy, the former owner of the Pour House, had to use a baggage cart to bring all the booze into his room.

I also heard that some club members got into a bit of a jam one year at a Red Roof Hotel in Cleveland. They’d gone out somewhere in the morning and told the hotel manager that they would be back at 1 p.m. to check out. When they returned a little early to collect their bags from Bob and Jean Kaniecki’s room, there was the hotel manager in bed with the maid! Bob said, “Don’t worry about us, you just keep doing what you’re doing,” and they just coolly collected their luggage and left!

And that wasn’t the only risqué story I heard in my interviews. One Halloween Ceili featured a blow-up male stripper, thanks to Diane and Wilma. Someone (who perhaps didn’t want to be named) hired a belly dancer for Pete’s birthday one year. And Maureen and Nan once dressed up like ladies of the night for a bus trip. Wish I had a picture of that to share with you!

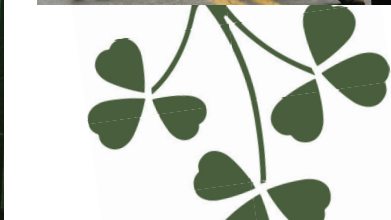
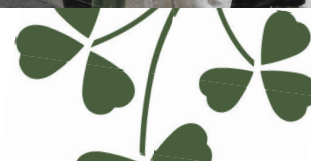
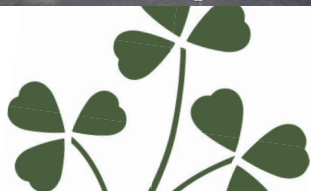
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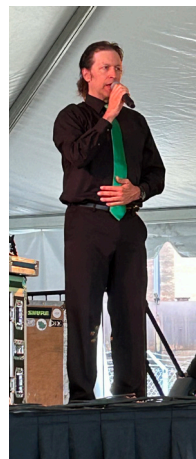
Getting to Know... con't.

Club members also made trips to Ireland together early in the club's history. The Connollys, the McHughs, Rege & Bea Fisher, and Joanne Fitzgerald danced their way through Ireland from Galway to Dublin for ten days. Mary Anne McGill, Kay Kowalski, Joe Moffitt, and Mary Nagel also made a trip.

Our club was born of the youthful enthusiasm and passion of a group of lively young people who are now the senior members of the club. And one of the great things about the PCC is that it has always been welcoming to new members and open to change. So, we now have a whole new crop of lively, enthusiastic young folks carrying on the tradition of Irish ceili dancing. May it always be so.

Enjoy the photos! See if you can recognize any of the "old timers" as youngsters!





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Here are some more wedding pictures for your enjoyment.

Ellen and Nick Johnson met on a blind date in Washington, DC and have been together ever since.

Also shown are Kay and George Balderose. How about that kilt?!

And, finally, we have Kathy and Ron Erhart, who were married on October 11, 1975. Happy fiftieth, Kathy and Ron!



Ellen and Nick Johnson



Kay and George Balderose

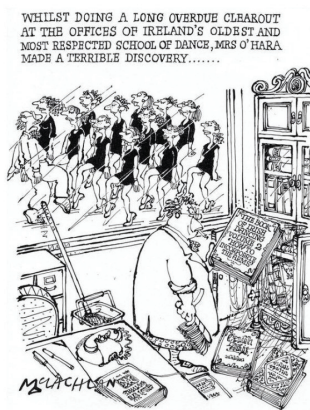


Kathy and Ron Erhart

PCC Picnic 2025



A great time was had by all at the PCC picnic on Sunday, September 21. What a delicious spread of food, all provided by members. The weather was warm and sunny, and we danced to music played by Vince Burns, Bruce Molyneaux and Richard Withers. Thanks to all who brought food, helped set up or helped clean up. Thanks especially to Maureen Strotmeyer for manning (or womanning?) the door, and to our wonderful picnic committee, Kathy Erhart and Sue Anne Hogan. Kathy and Sue Anne also want to extend a big thank-you to Joanne Fitzgerald, who was a real trouper in the kitchen.



Introducing the new PCC Board

At our annual meeting in June, Jackie Schaefer, Caley Donovan, and Evan Adcock were newly elected to the Board. Alex Brown, Craig Connelly, Pam Stewart and Sue Anne Hogan are retained on the Board. Current Board officers and members-at-large:



President – Alex Brown



Vice President
Sue Anne Hogan



Secretary - Craig Connelly



Treasurer - Evan Adcock

Members at Large:

Caley Donovan



Jackie Schaefer



Pam Stewart



You can look forward to in-depth profiles of new members in future issues of The Ceilier.

Upcoming Local Irish Events

What	When	Where	Contact & Information
LAOH Div. 11 Monte Carlo Night	10/18/25, 6p	Café 412, 2 West Crafton Ave.	Contact Mary Ellen Myers, or 412.389.8486 or Email: doy1106@aol.com . Mail checks to: 1507 Whitewood Drive, Pittsburgh PA 15220.
Gaelic Arts Society Irish Storyteller Alan Irvine	10/29/25, 2p	AJ Palumbo Hall	Pghgaelicarts@gmail.com
Singer Sarah McQuaide “Music Night on Jupiter”	10/24/25, 7p	4314 Rosanna Dr., Allison Park	https://www.eventbrite.com/e/sarah-mcquaid-on-jupiter-tickets=1374609045659 . Web site: https://sarahmcquaid.com
Gaelic Arts Society Mark Barrett speaks on Patrick Pearse	11/9,25, 2p`	AJ Palumbo Hall	Pghgaelicarts@gmail.com
Gallagher Fest	11/15/25	Mullaney’s Harp & Fiddle	412.642.6622.
Gaelic Arts Society Christmas Party	12/5/25	Holiday Inn, Greentree	Pghgaelicarts@gmail.com
PCC Christmas Ceili	TBD	TBD	Watch For Upcoming News
Gaelic Arts Society Jim Lamb speaks on Irish issues	1/18/26	AJ Palumbo Hall	Pghgaelicarts@gmail.com

Thanks, as always, to Diane Byrnes, host of Echoes of Erin, for most of this event information. Listen to Echoes of Erin at 12:30 Sunday afternoons on WEDO 810 AM or 93.3 FM.

Fall Garden Notes

Summer is over with a bang! I am always surprised how quickly the temperature decreases and annuals look tired. My Shasta daisies are almost all done flowering. The sun has moved in my yard, and the pond is colder causing the pond water lilies to stop flowering. I will get into the pond with chest waders to cut back the water lilies before the frost! Brrr!

Now is the time to take “stalk” of the plants you have grown this summer; which ones did well, and which did not. Which new varieties do you love and will grow next year. Look at how they grew and what mistakes you made and what you grew well. How much fertilizer and which product was used? Did you water and fertilize effectively? Were the weeds removed often? I will eliminate some annuals that just don’t hold up through the summer. I love lobelia but they sure fade very early. I am not sure why some of the tomato plants did not grow well. I was unable to plant as early as I usually do and that is I tend to be stubborn and try the plant a second year before I eliminate that variety. Plants that have rhizomes (pinecone looking bulbs) are dying back and will be stored soon. Those I store in their pots.

Any tropical plants or cactus worth keeping will need to be brought in and placed at a sunny window. I have multiple varieties of Christmas cactus, Easter Cactus and other flowering cactus. I also have a gardenia tree and a lemon tree that is loaded with lemons (about 40) that will ripen this winter.

The dahlias are going strong. They are the summer plant that doesn’t give up until a hard frost. Once their stalks and flowers are blackened and they will need cut down. If you love the variety and want to keep for next year they should be dug up and stored in a dry cool spot. After cleaning the clumps, you can store them in the clump or cut them apart. There are different ways to store. Some growers use paper bags and peatmoss; some use just peat moss in a box. I use grocery bags and about ½ cup vermiculite and the tubers (either clumps or divided tubers) folded over lightly and then placed in a box. I have a small unheated room off my basement that doesn’t go below 40°. Other bulb/tuber plants that can be saved are cannas and calla lilies are a few others. If you want any more detailed information, you can email me at boltoncs@gmail.com.

Flower catalogs are coming for Spring flowering shrubs and bulbs. This is the time to plant Spring flowering bulbs. Daffodils, tulips, snowdrops and crocus are various bulbs to plant now. Some shrubs are better trimmed back in the Fall such as hydrangeas, and “Knockout Roses.” Lilac, roses and azaleas are pruned in the Spring after they bloom. Clean out dead branches and assorted yard cleanup.

It is time to decorate for Fall and cut down/pull out the sad annuals and add mums, pumpkins and a bale of straw in their place. Mums can be planted in the ground and grown as perennials. I have not had luck with keeping mums because I do not have an area with full day sun, so I pitch them after the flowers die.

By Carolyn Bolton



*This is the time to be slow, Lie low to the wall
Until the bitter weather passes.
Try, as best you can, not to let The wire brush of doubt Scrape from
your heart All sense of yourself And your hesitant light.
If you remain generous, Time will come good;
And you will find your feet
Again on fresh pastures of promise,
Where the air will be kind And blushed with beginning.*

by JOHN O'DONOHUE

Swannanoa Gathering

Irish music lovers can find celebrations of Celtic culture all over the country, but students and instructors alike agree that the annual Celtic Week at the Swannanoa Gathering (that began in 1991) is one of the friendliest



and most welcoming. I learned this first-hand when I arrived at Warren Wilson College just outside Asheville, NC on a Sunday in late July.

My fellow students made me feel welcome and helped orient me to the place and culture, it being my first time. Many folks return year after year and have formed



long-standing friendships there. The week consists of daily classes and talks by world class musicians, singers, and dancers. After dinner, there's a slow session with

100+ participants led by an instructor or two and staff musicians. This is followed by a concert most evenings and fireflies dance as more sessions continue late into the night.

The faculty included the likes of Cathy Jordan of Dervish, fiddler Kevin Burke of Patrick Street, Kevin Crawford of Lunasa fame, guitarist Eamon O'Leary, and fiddler Mari Black. There were classes in Irish whistle, accordion, harp, singing, and set and sean nos dancing among others. I took bodhran (Irish drum) with the wonderful Anna Colliton, flute with Crawford, and Songs of Immigration with Jordan, one of my favorite Irish singers ever.

The instructors joined to form a super group for Thursday's ceili which left us panting for breath and excited for more. The week concluded with the Friday night student showcase featuring musicians, singers, and dancers at all levels. It was a thrill to stand on the same stage as some of our favorite artists! As we packed our bags and tucked away our instruments, we were exhausted from the late nights and intensive learning and buzzing with renewed enthusiasm for our musical pursuits. I definitely plan to go back.

By Heather Ward



The Fenian Raids

This article is copied from the book An Alternative History of Pittsburgh, by local author Ed Simon. I read the book thought this chapter on the Fenian Raids would interest our PCC community, so I contacted Mr. Simon and he graciously gave me permission to reprint it here. I highly recommend An Alternative History of Pittsburgh as well as Simon's other book on our hometown, The Soul of Pittsburgh. These books beautifully capture the unique culture of Pittsburgh.

Photo credit: Wikipedia

In 1866, Pittsburgh was where it was decided that the Irish would invade Canada. Founded by the Irish Republicans John O'Mahony and Michael Doheny, most who gathered at the meeting of what was known as the Fenian Brotherhood were refugees from the hideous potato famine that had killed a million people two decades before, victims of a de facto British policy of ethnic cleansing. Most of the soldiers in the

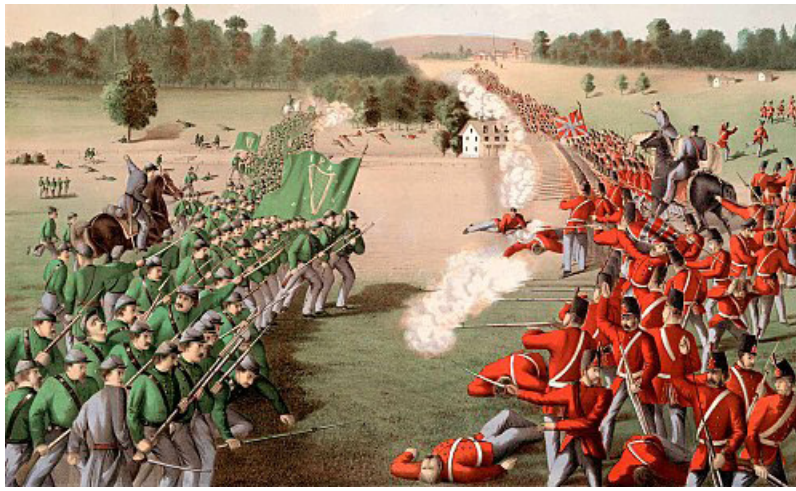
Fenian Brotherhood who assembled were also veterans of the Union cause, having fought for the emancipation of the enslaved while acquiring military training that would prove useful in their upcoming plan. Overseen by Major General "Fighting Tom" Sweeny, the Fenians believed that if an organized, tactical, strategic "invasion" of British holdings in southern Canada was launched on multiple fronts across the long border, they could force Parliament and the monarchy to acknowledge Irish independence. The Fenians drew their inspiration from Thomas Osborne Davis's "rebel song," singing, "And Ireland, long a province be / A nation once again!"

The Fenians had been battle-hardened at Shiloh and Antietam, Manassas and Gettysburg, and they were

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able to amass their own small arsenal to aid in their military assault. Gerald F. O'Neil writes in *Pittsburgh Irish: Erin on the Three Rivers* that "Sweeny's plan for a three-pronged assault on Canada was approved in Pittsburgh," and that the city "was a major recruitment center for the planned invasion, and



the sale of Irish bonds raised a considerable amount of money. A gunboat was purchased in Pittsburgh, along with arms and ammunition." In addition to ratification of their military strategy, the Fenian Brotherhood also decided in Pittsburgh that they'd be known by an alternate name – the Irish Republican Army.

O'Neil writes that the "original plan called for two diversionary threats to Toronto – a force launched from Chicago and Cleveland and another force crossing from Buffalo. The real threat to British control over Canada was supposed to be an assault on Montreal with over sixteen thousand men." The organization and planning in Pittsburgh weren't done in secret. Newspapers throughout the country covered it, and President Andrew Johnson's administration purposefully ignored the Fenian threat to Canada, in retaliation for the tacit support given to the Confederacy by the British government. According to Donald E. Graves and John R. Grodzinski in *Fighting for Canada: Seven Battles, 1758 – 1945*, the Fenian plans "required at least the non-intervention of the United States government, if not its active support, and it was encouraging that both President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward had hinted at support . . . albeit in the somewhat obscure language favored by politicians." Sweeny and O'Mahoney organized on the southern side of the Canadian border and thousands of their comrades raided New Brunswick and, most spectacularly, southern Ontario, where they were briefly victorious at the Battle of Ridgeway.

Just across the Niagara River from Buffalo, a thousand

men led by Brigadier General John O'Neil met their adversaries. By the end of that June day in 1866, over a hundred men would be killed. Though the US military was aware of the advancing Fenians, they waited fourteen hours before intercepting more from crossing into Canada. As they marched, the Fenians cut telegraph

wires and tore up railroad tracks, their phalanx led by a green flag with a centered golden harp, the first time that emblem was used in contemporary history. At Ridgeway, the Fenians encountered the Queen's Own Rifles of Toronto, and O'Neil was able to rout the Canadians and to occupy the town, marching on to a second battle on the northern shores of Lake Erie. There the Fenians were also victorious, though they ultimately abandoned their positions as Canadian and British regulars, far superior in number, descended on them.

There were several more skirmishes over the years, though none with the drama of Ridgeway. Peter Vronsky writes in *Ridgeway: The American Fenian Invasion and the 1866 Battle that Made Canada* that the skirmish was the "melancholy baptism of the Canadian army," concluding that "Ridgeway and the Fenian invasion were in many ways a midwife to Canadian institutional modernity and its aspirations to nationhood and union." From the battlefield at Ridgeway came new and pertinent concerns from the Canadians that the British were neither willing nor capable to fully defend them against their far more powerful neighbor to the south. In 1867, the Canadians achieved their own confederation, an independence from Great Britain that still escaped the Irish. Hence the supreme irony of that vote held earlier that year in Pittsburgh; the Fenian Brotherhood had dreamt of the independence of a nation, but accidentally secured it for Canada.



Life Events...



We note with sadness the recent death of Pat Keeley, husband of Val Keeley. He had struggled bravely with cancer for the past couple of years. Pat was a fun, friendly guy who loved Irish music and Notre Dame sports. Those of us who knew him well will miss him very much.

The club also lost long-time member Jack Stack recently. Jack was chairman of the Kickoff Ceili for two years. He loved working with wood. He made the coffee and tea stands for the club, and for the 2019 Kickoff Ceili, he also made coasters out of wine corks as souvenirs. Jack used to be a regular at the Harp for the Guinness and the music, but we have missed him in recent years due to a long illness.

Joan Connolly passed away peacefully at her home on July 2, 2025. Joan and her husband Ray have been long-time members of the Ceili Club and were original members of the performing group. Joan & Ray loved all types of dancing - Oldies, Square Dancing and Irish Dancing. They were a fun couple to watch, they moved so smoothly together.



Member Lea Hoffmaster married Patrick Koroly on September 27. They ask for prayers for their marriage. Congratulations, Lea and Pat!



Maureen Meisberger's mother, Mary Joyce, will turn 100 on November 12. She came from Listowel, County Kerry, to Pittsburgh in 1947.

We were blessed to have both our youngest and one of our oldest members of the club present at the Harp on July 29. And they both belong to the same family! Chuck McHugh is one of our oldest members at age 96, and his great grandson Luke Pollack, age 3, is believed to be our youngest member. (We thought Chuck was our oldest member until we heard about Mary turning 100 next month!)



It must have been unofficial family night, because we also noted on the same evening, the largest family group in recent memory to dance on a Tuesday evening at the Harp. Members Rachel and Maddie Summers brought nine family members with them - or ten if you count that their mom Alexandra is expecting!



Ceilier STAFF: Editor- Kathy Bashaar; Layout- Jim Guay

If you have an article of Irish interest that you would like to place in The Ceilier- email kbashaar@gmail.com.