

St. Pat's Committee honors John Doherty & The Irish Singers



Photo by Matt Johnson of Howdyshell Photos

The Irish Singers (left to right): Ivan Meads, Hermiston, Paul Green, Pilot Rock, Kreg Hawkins (deceased) Michael Duffy, Athena, John Doherty, Portland, Dan Emert, Pendleton, Scott Sager, Pilot Rock, Leo Doherty, Pilot Rock.

Story by Bonnie Sager

In 1982 James J. "Jim" Farley invited Ted Smith of the Pendleton KUMA Coffee Hour to come to the Farley Motor Company Showroom in Heppner to share stories, jokes, and music with family and friends. Thus began 20 years of Irish festivities in the town of Heppner, Oregon.

Contributing to the flavor of the day with song and guitar were John Doherty and Scott Sager. They got their start practicing in the lambing shed on the Doherty Ranch on Big Buttercreek. As the years went by their group grew with guitar, banjo, bass violin, piccolo, flute and organ, and they expanded their repertoire with trips to Ireland. John Doherty and The Irish Singers became a traditional part of the KUMA Coffee Hour and will be honored this year for their many years of providing music for the annual celebration.

There is no finer place to enjoy Irish music than a sheep ranch. And that is where John

Doherty and the Irish Singers began.

No one can remember the exact date but it was lambing season in the early 1980s. John and Scott Sager were enjoying a February afternoon at the Doherty Sheep Ranch between John's shift in the lambing shed. As Scott strummed his guitar, the men sang songs they remembered from their youth. John had a few copies of the music his brother Joe Doherty used to sing so they tried their luck on the Irish tunes.

Before his death in April of 1981, Joe was well known throughout Umatilla and Morrow counties as an exceptionally fine Irish tenor. He often sang at mass in Pendleton and Pilot Rock and for funerals in both counties. After Joe died, John was asked to accompany the organist at mass in Pilot Rock. When the organist moved from town, John asked Scott to accompany him on his guitar.

This was the beginning of many trips to the Doherty Sheep

Ranch. Between shifts in the lambing shed, the men played and sang and enjoyed long afternoons and evenings with the sheepherders and tenders.

John and Scott remarked that they really should learn some Irish tunes. John had "a beautiful brogue so rich and sweet" as stated in the words to the Irish song "Tim Finnegan's Wake." It was time to expand their music repertoire.

In 1985 John and Doris Doherty took their family to Ireland to visit family and friends. While enjoying the afternoon in an Irish pub it became John's turn to sing a song for the others. This is a custom in pubs — each one takes a turn singing a favorite song. The only song John could remember was "The Battle of New Orleans" made popular by the American recording artist, Johnny Horton.

John's cousin Kevin remarked, "John, you really should learn some Irish music!" John answered, "Kevin, if you

promise to come to the states, I'll learn some Irish songs."

Before John and Doris returned to the states they purchased a few Clancey Brothers tapes and found sheet music at a shop in Portland. The challenge was met and the little group began to practice performance in Heppner. Other performances in 1988 included a talent show in Pilot Rock, the Wagon Train, the Morrow County Fair and Rodeo in Heppner and the Umatilla County Fair in Hermiston.

In 1989 Michael Duffy moved to La Grande to attend school at Eastern Oregon University. The Irish group was back to the original members — John and Leo Doherty, Scott Sager and daughters, Shelley, Kelly and Jodi, and Paul Ellis. Practice continued at the ranch during lambing season and again the band played in Heppner for St. Patrick's Day. In June they played for the Wagon Train where Ivan Meads, an electrician and guitar player from Hermiston, joined the men.

Practice continued at the sheep ranch during the lambing season of 1990. Some nights the men went to the lambing shed and sang for the night watchman. The lambing shed is located on the old road between Vinson and Gurdane about two miles from the Doherty Ranch in the north fork of Butter Creek Canyon at the foot of the round hills 15 air miles from Pilot Rock.

There are no city lights near Vinson to dim the view of the heavens. On frosty February nights during the dark of the moon, stars seem close enough to touch. How can we ever forget the sight of 5000 ewes, pregnant with their lambs, breathing heavy, heads turned to the door of the lambing shed where Scott is softly playing "Will Ya Go Lassie, Go". We won't forget — nor will John and Leo and the night watchman. Those were nights to remember.

Lambing, docking, shearing and shipping — these were all occasions to gather and sing. A meal would be shared in the kitchen at the ranch — the herders and night watchman were always invited, as well as friends from town. Big meals of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, salad, bread, pies and cakes were served. It was a dishwasher's nightmare.

In August of 1990, John Doherty turned 50 years old. Doris had a party in his honor at the ranch. Along with the visiting, eating and drinking, there was music. The big Quonset hut was their shop and a perfect place to gather and sing. Paul Green joined the Irish Singers that night.

Paul currently lives in Pilot Rock and works for Ramsay-Gerding Construction. Paul is a former San Francisco 49er where he was a quarterback. He plays guitar and sings with the Irish group. Paul comments, "I've had some great times (with the Irish Singers) — I just wish I could remember them all!"

The last Irish group practices at the ranch were in 1993. The ranch was sold that year after the sheep were sheared in May. A way of life came to an end but the Irish Singers continued. When Gordon, one of the herders on the Doherty Ranch, died, the Irish Singers were there to lay him to rest. He was buried at Vinson Cemetery, in the Doherty family gravesite.

In 1994, Michael Duffy returned to the Irish Singers. Practice was held at Sager's and the singers added Andy Emert on violin and the voices of Jack McGuire and Jeanine Rieff. Jodi and Kelly Sager played flute; Scott, Paul and Mike played guitar; the Doherty brothers sang and the voices of Mike, Paul and Scott were added to the mix. They played at the Great Pacific in Pendleton the night before Heppner's celebration. The crowded room rang with Irish music and song.

The following year found the group practicing in Paul Green's basement — John and Leo Doherty, Scott Sager and Paul Green, Jack McGuire and Andy Emert who tuned his fiddle and rosined his bow. Ivan Meads returned to the singers, adding another guitar to the mix. Again they played at the Great Pacific, in Heppner and for the Wagon Train.

In 1996 while playing at the Great Pacific, Kreg Hawkins from Pendleton remarked to the group that he sure enjoyed their music. Kreg and Dick Kaiser had teamed up for years in a duo they called "Darrel and Daryl." Kreg played a fast mandolin and enjoyed harmonizing. Scott invited Kreg to join the Irish Singers in Heppner and he accepted. Dan Emert joined the Irish group the same year. His fiddling skills were a notable asset. Dan lives in Pendleton, has a degree in biology and works for Interpath Laboratories. Dan and brother Andy Emert played with the Irish Singers in Heppner that year. Joining the fiddlers were John and Leo Doherty, Scott Sager, Paul Green, Ivan Meads, Kreg Hawkins and Kelly Sager. The singers played upstairs at the Elks Club in Heppner and downstairs for the patrons in the bar. Angel Gambino of Detroit, Michigan, and fellow law school friend of Kelly Sager also played with the Irish group.

In 1997 the Irish Singers purchased hats for their members and a five-channel sound system from Gina Meengs. Their organization was growing and the sound improved year by year. Rod Bonifer from Athena and Ashley Ward, daughter of Jim and Susie Ward from Morrow County, joined the singers at the Great Pacific and in Heppner. Twelve band members went to Heppner in 1997 — John and Leo Doherty, Scott Sager, Michael Duffy, Paul Green, Jack McGuire, Ivan Meads, Kreg Hawkins, Dan Emert, Kelly Sager, Rod Bonifer and Ashley Ward.

In 1998 the Irish Singers purchased another hat and a dark green shirt with the words "St. Paddy's Players" embroidered on the front. John and Leo Doherty, Scott Sager, Paul Green, Ivan Meads, Michael Duffy, Dan Emert, Jack McGuire, Ashley Ward, Kreg Hawkins, Dick Kaiser and Kelly Sager played at the GP. All but Kelly traveled to Heppner the next day. Heppner added a "Ceili" to their list of attractions. Michael Duffy was the master of ceremonies and the Irish Singers performed.

In 1999 there was enough money in the "tip jar" to purchase a "snake" and "head" to add to the sound system. John and Leo, Scott, Paul, Kreg, Ivan, Dan Emert and Michael Duffy traveled to Heppner for the St. Patrick's Day events. On March 17 which was a Wednesday that year, the Singers drove to Kelly's Bar in Milton-Freewater for a feature performance. Since 1995 they had performed for Katherine Kelly at her home outside Milton-Freewater. Now she had a new establishment on Hwy. 11 and wanted the band there to celebrate. Another tradition is born.

In August of 1999 the Irish Singers were asked to perform for the newly formed "Friday Night Alive" celebration in Pendleton. They played on a bandstand in front of the Great Pacific. A nice crowd turned out for the event.

Performing in Heppner in the year 2000 were band members Leo Doherty, Scott Sager, Kreg Hawkins, Jack McGuire, Ivan Meads, Dan Emert, Paul Green and Michael Duffy. For the first

time singer John Doherty was unable to make the trip to Heppner. John and Doris had moved to Portland and he was "living on the road" in an 18-wheeler. But the music survived and in April of 2000 they bought a "mixer board" to add to the sound system. John returned to Pendleton for the Friday Night Alive performance which was held in front of the Rainbow Cafe. Matt Johnson took a professional photo of the Irish Singers which was placed on their web site.

The year 2001 began with practice at Paul Green's. Their first performance was at the Pendleton Elks Club on February 9. They played at Sampson's Cafe in Pilot Rock on February 16, at Kelly's Bar in Milton-Freewater on February 23 and the DoubleTree in Athena on March 2.

On March 5, their world came apart. Kreg Hawkins and Jerry Doherty had scheduled the day to go four-wheeling in the hills near Gurdane. All went as planned until early afternoon when Kreg followed Jerry up a long hill. When Kreg did not come over the brow of the hill, Jerry drove down to investigate. Kreg's 4-wheeler had flipped and landed on him, crushing his chest. He died within a few minutes.

For the past six years Kreg had been a spark of energy and enthusiasm the band enjoyed and respected. In a few short days Kreg would be buried at the Helix Cemetery. He was laid to rest with the plaintive notes to "Danny Boy" performed by Leo Doherty, Scott Sager, Paul Green, Michael Duffy, Dan Emert, Andy Emert, Ivan Meads, Dick Kaiser and Leo's brother Jerry Doherty — the Irish Singers.

Performing at the Great Pacific was difficult but uplifting for the band. They knew if they could get through that evening they would be able to meet the rest of their musical commitments. John and Leo Doherty, Jack McGuire, Ivan Meads, Scott Sager, Paul Green, Dan Emert and Michael Duffy traveled to Heppner on March 17. That evening they drove to Milton-Freewater and played at Kelly's Bar and the next day gave a performance at the Vet's Hospital in Walla Walla.

Kreg's last message to the Irish was written the day before he died. He had made arrangements for the Singers to perform at the Rainbow Cafe and was giving last minute instructions. "Let's make this a good one and really kick some music butt down there!" Kreg's parting words carried the singers through the season.

Michael Duffy says, "We're not real formal but we sure have a lot of fun — for me personally it's very rewarding." Our final quote is from John Doherty. John said, "Ya know, in 1956 Elvis Presley cut his first record. Well, in 1956 I performed with a glee club from St. Martin's School in Seattle at the King TV Studio. Elvis went on to be successful but I made it to Heppner and I'm damn proud of it!"

Appearances the Irish Singers have made include six weddings, at least eight funerals, and at least 37 different businesses and events.

Rebekah Lodge holds card party

Winners at the Holly Rebekah Lodge monthly card party held Saturday evening were Lyle Peck, high men and Luella Taylor, high woman. Lows went to Clarence Buchanan and Marge Ball. Traveling (a free night's play) went to Beverly Steagall and Xaveir Azavedo (who gave his prize to his mother-in-law, Dot Halvorsen). Proceeds from the party will be donated to the Friendship Fund of the Order. Hostesses for the night were Joyce Buchanan, Virginia Peck and Dorothy Jackson.

The next card party is scheduled for Saturday, April 6, and will be the last one until this fall when play will resume in October. All parties are open to the public. Proceeds are dedicated toward the upkeep on the IOOF hall, various funds or projects within the lodge or the community.

Bucknum's BARBEQUE

Wednesday through Saturday of St. Patrick's Week will be at **JOHN'S OTHER PLACE** Main Street, Heppner

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T-POSTS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 1/2" #125 hv-wghts 1⁹⁰ 6" #125 hv-wghts 2⁰⁰ 	BARBED WIRE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 pt. D/W Ranch Hand 29⁹⁵ 4 pt. D/W Ranch Hand 32⁹⁵ BarbLess D/W Ranch Hand 29⁵⁰ 	
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HI-QUAL HEAVY DUTY GATES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12' gate 92⁰⁰ 14' gate 106⁰⁰ 16' gate 114⁰⁰ 	HI-QUAL PANELS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16' range panel 92⁸⁵ 16' heavy duty panel 125⁰⁰ 	HI-QUAL GENERAL DUTY GATES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10' gate 67⁰⁰ 12' gate 74⁰⁰
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Time to spiff up the town

It's time to get our town spiffed up for the annual St. Patrick's Celebration.

The Chamber of Commerce/Oregon Department of Transportation highway litter pick-up will take place on Tuesday, March 12 from 5-6 p.m.

As in the past, participants are asked to use the attached SOLV litter bag to pick up any trash or unsightly weeds along highway frontage and leave the bag by a highway sign for the Chamber of Commerce volunteers to pick up.

Contact the project coordinator to obtain an orange marker flag for any hazardous items in the clean-up area.

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