

GREASED PIGS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

The Irish people are known for their high spirit. In my youth I remember my Irish father using the expression, “as hard to catch as a greased pig.” I had not thought about this expression for many years until I saw some references to it in a packet of old historic letters that I was researching at work.

The Christmas letter read, “We had quite a time this Christmas. The boys have a shaved pig for this afternoon and there is going to be a horse race.” The prize was to be given to the winner of two of the three heats. The letter went on to speak of other amusements to occur on Christmas including a sack race, blindfolded wheelbarrow racing and foot races.

The letter writer continued “I cannot do justice to the pig race. As the animal was let loose, just imagine the whole Brigade running and shouting after Mr. Porkey, and he too commenced to squeal as hard as he could and kept running as fast as a pig can go. Finally after sundry upsets and knock downs he was finally captured and placed ‘hors de combat.’”

The letter also referred to a horse race prior to the greased pig contest. I know that horse racing is very popular in Ireland, but I did not know that the Irish were so fond of the sport that they had horse races on Christmas Day immediately after attending Mass. The letter mentioned three heats of racing that started around 1:30 PM. A horse named “Old Bull Run” won two of the three heats of the Christmas races.

I skimmed through some more of the archive of letters and came across one discussing a large St. Patrick’s Day celebration. Again there were various Irish sporting activities listed. This time-honored national anniversary for Ireland’s favorite saint is always celebrated with all the exhaustless spirit and enthusiasm of Irish nature. Again I saw references to greased pig contests in which the winner got the victim.

The letters then discussed the main event of the St. Patrick’s Day celebration, the steeplechase race. A group of Irishmen had the notion of hosting an enormous steeplechase. They made provisions for 30,000 spectators to attend. A race course was built for one time use only as well as a grandstand for important visitors. The course was two and a half miles over gently rolling hills with four hurdles each at four and a half feet high. There were five ditch fences built, with two artificial rivers 15 feet wide and six feet deep. All of this was complete with the traditional bright flags alongside the jumps. Again the rules were similar to the Christmas Day celebration. The winner would be the best two out of three heats with the prize money set at \$500.

A church was to be built just for the day so that there could be a proper St. Patrick's Day Mass said by a Jesuit priest. Immediately after the church service the riders got dressed in colorful attire for the steeplechase. The sky was the bluest of blue for the day. The bugle sounded and the races started at 11:00. The overall winner of the race was a descendent of Prince Blucher's horse that fought in the Battle of Waterloo.

After the races a grand lunch was prepared. A mountain of sandwiches disappeared and numerous bottles of wine were uncorked. The most popular attraction at this St. Patrick's Day lunch was the spiced whiskey punch.

The afternoon was filled with seven other traditional contests in the following order. First, a foot race of one half mile distance. Second, casting weights which ranged from 10-14 pounds. Third, running after the soaped pig. Fourth a hurdled race one-half mile distance. Fifth, a wheelbarrow race with blindfolded contestants. Sixth, sack jumping race of five hundred yards. And seventh, an Irish dancing contest.

After the seven activities, the day's events culminated with a large dinner celebration. The food was accounted for as; 35 hams, a side of a roasted ox, an entire pig, as well as an unlimited number of turkeys, chickens, ducks and small game washed down by eight baskets of champagne, ten gallons of rum and 22 gallons of whiskey, all just before the evening's theatricals as well as other amusements were about to commence.

Why such an undertaking? The race took place on March 17th, 1863. The Irish Brigade soldiers during the Civil War wanted to celebrate St. Patrick's Day in style. The racecourse was marked out on every side in bold letters "Grand Irish Brigade Steeplechase."

Commander-in-chief of the Army of the Potomac, Major-General Joseph Hooker was the guest of honor. During the races he proposed a toast, "To the Irish Brigade - God Bless them." The Irish Brigade, the 69th New York Regiment, was one of the most successful and colorful units of the Union Army during the Civil War. It was comprised of Irish immigrant soldiers who were snubbed by traditional American soldiers and were forced to form their own homogenous unit. The Brigade had recently fought the Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia which had been a massacre for them. Out of their 1,300 men who went into battle 545 were killed or wounded.

Surprisingly this race took place on one side of the Rappahannock River across from the Confederate Camp that was located not far away from where the

festivities took place. The Irish quartermaster was excused from duty and went to Washington, D.C. to round up the provisions for the celebration.

The Christmas celebration that I referenced earlier in this paper took place three months earlier by the Irish Brigade on December 25th, 1862. Again credit must be given to the spirited Irish Brigade for maintaining their traditions and high spirits in the midst of wartime hardships. They were a valiant unit that was considered an outcast by many Americans. In the future, I will look at any expressions related to a “greased pigs contest” as an example of the pervasive Irish spirit.

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