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AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

THE GANNON FAMILY
IRISH MUSIC AND DANCE FROM MISSOURI



HELEN GANNON AND PATRICK GANNON **TIN WHITSTLE**
EILEEN GANNON **HARP**
KURT AND NIALL GANNON **FIDDLE**
RILEY AND FIONA GANNON **DANCE**
TOMMY MARTIN **UILLEANN PIPES**

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November 15, 2006
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THE GANNON FAMILY

IRISH MUSIC AND DANCE FROM MISSOURI

St. Louis has been home to Irish immigrants since the era of the Louisiana Purchase; many of the city's firsts—millionaire, newspaper editor and sheriff—were members of the "Irish Crowd." Later, the Kerry Patch emerged as the displaced "Famine Irish" settled in northern St. Louis. From wealthy to impoverished, legendary to outcast, the St. Louis Irish had woven their traditions into those of the city (Ó hAllmhuráin, 23).

When P.J. and Helen Gannon arrived in St. Louis in 1967 with their eldest son Seán, however, they found no distinct Irish community, and they did not expect to stay much longer than P.J.'s one-year fellowship. Their return to Ireland was delayed continually, and the family grew with the additions of Liam, Niall and Eileen. In the earliest years, P.J. and Helen taught their children the traditions of Ireland so that they would fit in when they returned home one day. Nearly forty years later, the Gannons are still in St. Louis, and their surname has become synonymous with Irish music and dance in Missouri.

"We had an accordion before we had a dining room table! So, we did what kept us happy, and that was play our music and do our dancing and talk to one another. There were no teachers. So, we had to learn our own way of passing on the tradition. We had to search for it and go back and grab and hold on to what we had." (Helen Gannon, as quoted in Everts-Boehm).

P.J. is a consulting psychiatrist at Forest Park Hospital and retired St. Louis University professor; but he grew up in a family of singers and litters in Dunmore in County Galway. With Helen, he helped to found St. Louis Irish Arts in 1972, a local branch of Dublin-based Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (a gathering of Irish musicians), to preserve their cultural heritage. In 1981 and again in 1982, P.J. won the All Ireland competition for mouth organ, a first for anyone in St. Louis. With these accomplishments, he gained considerable attention from the local media, and the enrollment in St. Louis Irish Arts (SLIA) classes increased.

Like P.J., Helen grew up in a family of artists, though she hails from Limerick. While her mother and sister played piano, her brother played the accordion, and Helen danced, starting at six years old. Her love of dance is legendary. She tells stories of dancing in her sleep and waking her sister. Their mother could pick no worse punishment than to "take away" her dance lessons. As an adult, Helen became a registered nurse and midwife, but she says that her Master Teacher certification from the Irish Dancing Commission (at age 45) is probably more treasured than her nursing degree.

Both Helen and P.J. have served as master artists in Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP) several times, Helen for step dance and P.J. for tin whistle, mouth organ and sean-nós singing, the unaccompanied old-style singing of Gaelic Ireland. Together, they passed down

deep devotion, understanding and talent for traditional Irish arts to their children, and now their grandchildren.

The Gannons were especially adept at finding more advanced teachers for their diligent and gifted children. They sent all three boys to Chicago regularly to learn fiddle from renowned artists like Johnny McGreevy. As Niall excelled at fiddling, the Gannons sought out James Kelly in Florida. The two engaged in an intensive apprenticeship, which led to Niall becoming a master fiddler, selected twice for TAAP.

Eileen, the youngest sibling and only daughter, says she learned to dance the minute she learned to walk. Today, she is an All Ireland champion harpist. In fact, she is the only Gannon who makes her career as an artist, both performing and teaching. With her parents and siblings, she has traveled regularly between the United States and Ireland to train, compete, teach, perform and spend time with extended family. Eileen and Niall both teach at SLIA, which has grown so prolific that the school has hosted thousands of students since 1972. Like Eileen and Niall, some of those students now continue P.J. and Helen's dream, teaching at SLIA.

The brother and sister team have produced and arranged four CDs of traditional music over the last nine years, each recording featuring SLIA teachers, students and guest artists from Ireland. *Volume III: from Limerick to St. Louis Irish Arts* is dedicated to the memory of Helen's mother Sadie Phillips who "always made sure there was music in the house and enough money for Helen for Irish dancing lessons." At today's performances, Sadie's great-granddaughters, Riley and Fiona, carry on her legacy.

Everts-Boehm, Dana. You'll Never Get Ireland in America: Irish Traditional Dance and Music in St. Louis, Missouri.
<http://maa.missouri.edu/mfap/articles/irish.pdf>

Ó hAllmhuráin, Gearáoid. From Kerry Patch to the U.S. Congress: Irish Traditional Music Thrives in St. Louis. *Treoir: Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann*, Volume 31:3, 1999. 23-26.

For more information on St. Louis Irish Arts: <http://slia.org/>
Lisa L. Higgins, director
Missouri Folk Arts Program

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site at <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

