

"Trouble in the Irish Village" by Nick Whitmer
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<http://pipers.ie/>

I have a great deal of documentation to support what is said in this article. Please contact me if you would like citations, or more information about specific aspects of the article.

Nick Whitmer
July 2015



SEANCHAS

TROUBLE IN THE IRISH VILLAGE

Nick Whitmer

IN 1904 PAT TOUHEY, the foremost uilleann piper of his generation, played for some weeks at the theatre in the Irish Village at the World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. There Touhey became part of a controversy which received widespread press coverage. Some other performers who shared the stage with Touhey objected to his act, calling it degrading to the Irish. He had, however, the support of management, and was a success with the paying public.

The St. Louis fair was a big operation: 1,500 buildings on 1,200 acres, 19.96 million visitors. It ran for seven months. Because it was not then an independent country, Ireland was not allowed to have a national pavilion in the main part of the fair. Instead, private money was raised to erect an Irish Village on "The Pike," the adjacent area for side shows and concessions. The Village featured replicas of the old Irish House of Parliament and other historic structures, including Blarney Castle, in which there was a theatre.

It was the intention of the organizers to show the diversity and quality of Irish arts, crafts and industries. By one count, 136 men and women came from Ireland to work at the Village including lacemakers, weavers, potters, singers, dancers, musicians, and a troupe of actors.

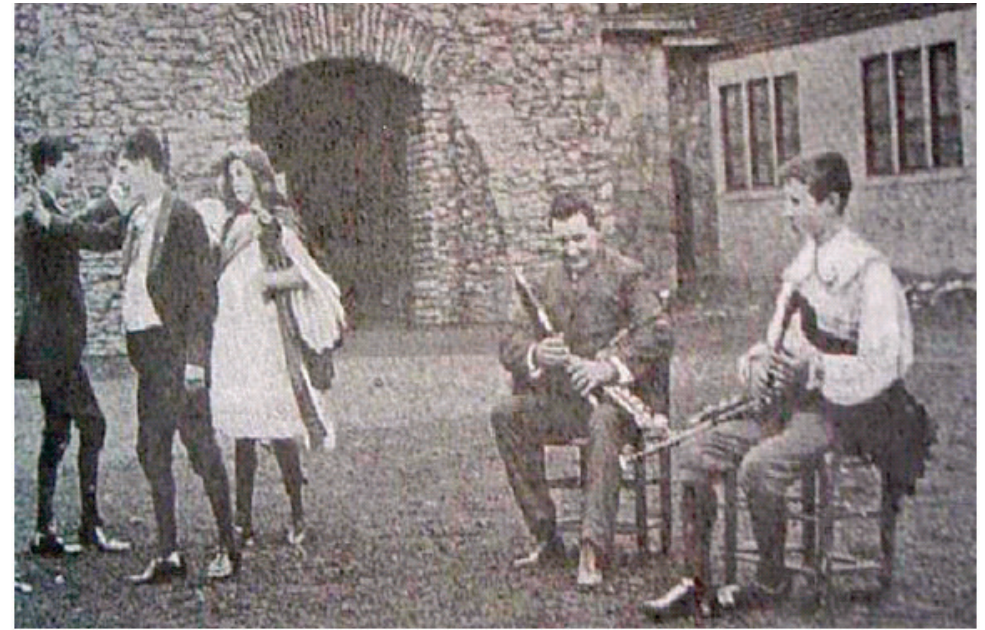
Touhey, an Irish-American based in New York City, was hired to perform as a solo act at the theatre in the Irish Village, one part of a program that included singing, dancing, acrobats, and dramatic performances – short plays or skits or farces. In his act he told jokes, sang, played the pipes and perhaps danced. He also played pipes for the dancers.

By 1904 Touhey had been in show business for almost twenty years including ten years in vaudeville as a comedian and musician. For most of his career he performed either in plays with other actors, or in a vaudeville act with a partner or partners. For two years bracketing his appearance at St. Louis he played at least twenty solo vaudeville engagements, as far as is known the only time in his career he did extensive solo work.

The World's Fair officially opened on Saturday April 30, 1904. This was the first day that Pat Touhey did his solo turn on the stage. At least three performers were particularly incensed by Touhey's performance: actors Dudley Digges, Marie Quinn, and Gerald A. Ewing, a singer. Digges and Quinn had formerly worked for what was to become the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and were particularly sensitive to slights on Irish character. They condemned the "anti-Irish tone" of Touhey's act, and a later account says their indignation was provoked because Touhey "sang a song which was a vile caricature on the Irish race." They also objected to his costume and some of the jokes he told. The next day or the day thereafter, Digges and at least nine other actors and musicians sent a written letter of protest to the management of the Irish Village.

The offensive song, "It Takes the Irish to Beat the Dutch," was copyright 1903 and a product of Tin Pan Alley.

It takes the Irish to beat the Dutch.
 What the Irish can't accomplish it don't amount to much.
 With their scientific tricks
 They can never fool the Micks
 You can bet it takes the Irish
 To beat the Dutch.



Pat Touhey, center, playing for the Kelly Trio, dancers, at the Irish Village. Piper on the right may be Tom Ennis (1889-1931) of Chicago, or Edward Harrison (1888?-?) of Dublin or someone else entirely.

Image from: Patrick D'Arcy, UilleannObsession.com, Diary 2004. http://uilleannobsession.com/diary_2004.html

A lower quality version of this photo was published here: 'Odd Amusements of All Countries on the Pike' with picture captioned 'Dancers and Pipers, Irish Village', 'On every side can be heard the Irish piper making the welkin ring with his odd melodies.'

Los Angeles Herald, 2 Oct. 1904, Sunday Supplement, 10 column 5.

California Digital Newspaper Collection cdnc.ucr.edu.

<http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-in/cdnc?a=d&d=LAH19041002.2.309.26&srpos=1&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-%22irish+village%22+and+%22pike%22----->

Why did the other performers object to this song? A good question. Was it undignified? Did they misunderstand the song? In one account the protestors claim that "the Dutch" were South African Boers, who at the time were viewed with sympathy by many Irish nationalists. The song makes it clear that "the Dutch" in this case were Germans and Germany.

Myles Murphy, manager of the Irish Village, later told a newspaper, "Tuohy's [sic] performance was within bounds at all times, and whatever objectionable points it may have had at first were promptly cut out."

Touhey was allowed to continue his appearances, apparently with some modification. The actors were not so fortunate. The "poetic drama" they were presenting was performed three times, then scratched. It was apparently

a bewilderment to fairgoers, although the actors claimed it was never given a fair chance. The actors had to content themselves with comedies and farces.

The following Wednesday, May 4, John McCormack arrived in St. Louis from Dublin. McCormack (1884-1945), later to become world famous as an Irish tenor, was at the beginning of his career. He was hired to sing at the Irish Village. His later accounts of his time in St. Louis are one of the reasons this episode has not been completely forgotten. Some months before leaving Ireland he met his future wife, Lily Foley, a singer and dancer. She too had been hired to work at the Fair and was at St. Louis.

Management was unhappy with the actors ("Murphy says they [the actors] are no good...& they won't leave.

... So there is a kind of deadlock..."); the actors were unhappy with the light material they were obliged to perform. Three weeks passed, probably in an atmosphere of frustration and distrust. On May 24th Touhey performed and this time sang another song which caused offence. The song was another Tin Pan Alley product, "The 17th of March," copyright 1904. "This ditty was, if possible, even more objectionable than his previous effort. It went on to describe how Irishmen take a month to celebrate the feast of St. Patrick." In other words, "thirty days to observe St. Patrick's Day – one day to celebrate and twenty-nine to get over it."

The Chinese take just one week when their holiday it starts,
But it takes a month to celebrate the seventeenth of March.
Altho' an Irishman will work, yes, seven days a week,
And work both night and day at that, about it he won't speak.
An Irishman can give up drink until his throat does parch,
But he pays up for lost time on the seventeenth of March.

John McCormack, scheduled to go on next, refused to go on stage. Digges, ready to perform in a sketch, also heard the song and went to the stage manager, Luke Martin, to protest. They had words, and Digges left the theatre. He was joined by Ewing, Quinn, Foley, McCormack and actor C. O'Brien Teeling. The performance of the sketch was cancelled, the audience turned away.

This incident has become part of the lore of Touhey and of McCormack. According to one version of his story, McCormack told management " 'Either he goes [...] or I go.' I received what was due me, that afternoon, and never again did I sing in that place."

Digges, Quinn and Ewing were fired and told not to return to the Irish Village. Touhey continued to perform, probably through August 13th.

Digges, Quinn and Ewing decided to go out in a blaze of glory "as champions of Irish dignity & self-respect."

Their efforts generated much newspaper coverage, particularly in the Irish-American press. Their protest centered around "the introduction of the [despised] 'Stage Irishman' in the Irish Theatre..." Touhey was characterized as a "Bowery actor." The Bowery is a neighborhood in New York City well known at that time for crime, vice and low amusement.

Such was the protesters opinion. In contrast here is a review of his solo act from November 1903 in Fitchburg, Massachusetts:

Pat Touhey is a very funny comedian, and has been received with great favor all along the line, on account of his strenuous efforts to do away with the rank caricature of his race, which for so long was considered by a very small minority as comedy. He sets an excellent example to his brother comedians by appearing in a neat, refined make-up. His monologue is extremely funny, and his Irish bagpipe solos invariably bring down the house.

Likewise the great music collector Francis O'Neill was unflinching positive in his assessments of Touhey and spoke well of his appearance at St. Louis. O'Neill and many others overlooked, or were not troubled by, Touhey's stage antics.

The impact of the St. Louis controversy on Touhey's career was probably minimal. By 1904 he was reasonably successful in vaudeville. September 1905 to December 1906 he appeared in his last play, *The Rocky Road to Dublin*. From then on it was all vaudeville until his last gig, probably in 1921. Of the scores of Touhey newspaper and archive references after 1906, only two refer to non-vaudeville engagements, one a dance (Feb. 1913), the other a concert (Dec. 1914).

Touhey's experience in St. Louis was not a pleasant one. It probably steered him away – and in at least one instance he was barred – from engagements sponsored by ardent Irish nationalists in some parts of the country. But this was not a major setback. His real focus and career path was in show business.

Nick Whitmer
February 2015



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