

Contemporary Irish Mexican Gatherings and Forays in California: The Irish Mexican Association (IMA), 1994-2007

By Patrick Goggins



IMA parade unit members during a re-enactment of the San Patricio Battalion

Sparked by the iris in the eye, a brown-eyed Mexican American woman named Patricia invited a green-eyed Irish American man named Patrick for a festive outing on her birthday, which happened to be 17 March, St. Patrick's Day. The ancestral music and familial conversation proved to be so appealing that Patty García and Pat Goggins decided to summon others to join them on Cinco de Mayo for even more Irish-Mexican bonding. All soon concluded that Irish and Mexican people have many historical and contemporary connections. Both spring from ancient spiritual peoples including Celts and Aztecs. Both adopted rural village life. Both share the distinction of being the immediate neighbours of the world's first industrial powers, Britain and the United States. While for the most part, the Industrial Revolution passed Ireland and Mexico by, the two countries nonetheless provided major colonial and immigrant labour for their powerful neighbours. The immigrant experience intensified historic Irish and Mexican group values of religion, family, ceremony, music, literature and civic activism.

In California there exists a particular empathy between Irish and Mexicans on the issue of immigration. The Irish were the immigrants of yesteryear, coming to the East Coast United States with its reputed anti-Catholic Protestant establishment. However, those Irish Catholics who came west to California, which was part of Spain, and later Mexico, were largely welcomed by an establishment which favoured Catholics. Mexicans are the immigrants of today, facing a sometimes hostile environment in California. The Irish show gratitude and strong support to their Mexican/Latin friends.

Early on, the Irish Mexican Association (IMA) determined to enlighten the public about the relevance of this history and relationship in a unique manner by being innovative, entertaining, educational and provocative. IMA entered San Francisco's St. Patrick's Day and Cinco de Mayo parades with vivid historical re-enactors portraying the San Patricio Battalion. Our inspiration for this choice was Chris Mathews of Santa Cruz. Chris was the first to bring the

then unheralded and controversial story of the San Patricios to a wider English speaking audience with his profound play, "A Flag to Fly", first produced in 1986 in Santa Cruz, California, by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. "Flag" probes the diverse and confounding motivations of the US Army soldiers who not only deserted whilst invading Mexico, but also joined the opposing forces. It was when discussing the drama of the San Patricios and reflecting on the setting that we realised that two defining events in the history of Ireland and Mexico occurred at the same time: The potato famine in Ireland, 1846-1850, which, together with emigration, eventually halved the population of Ireland, and the Mexican American War, 1846-1848, which almost halved the territory of the state of Mexico.

IMA recruited the well-drilled Mexican Americans of the Hispanic American Military Preservation Society with their authentic red and blue uniforms and muskets. Novice Irish re-enactors, including - ironically - several Irish American Immigration Attorneys, were drafted into the uniformed ranks. The IMA parade unit also included two antique cars carrying four honoured guests from the Irish and Mexican communities: 1) Chris Mathews, playwright, 2) Marco González, Comandante, Hispanic American Military Preservation Society, 3) Charles Richards, *pro bono* lawyer, California Irish Forum for Peace in Northern Ireland, 4) John Ortega, first lobbyist for the Mexican American Political Association in the California state capital, Sacramento. IMA was awarded either first or second Place in Marching and Classic Cars in the St. Patrick's Day Parades of 1995, 1996 and 1997. The IMA San Patricio Parade Unit was equally successful in the Cinco de Mayo Parades of 1995, 1996 and 1997. In 1997 the spectacular Ballet Folklórico Alma de México of South San Francisco graced the IMA San Patricio Unit of the Cinco de Mayo Parade.

The Hispanic American Military Preservation Society, having gained fame with their San Patricios Re-enactments, 'deserted' IMA for greater glory with the filming in Mexico of a Metro Goldwyn Mayer movie, *One Man's Hero*, a Hollywood version of the San Patricio tale, and other films, including movies about Zorro and The Alamo. Without an army it was time for IMA to move from parades to other venues.

IMA co-sponsored several showings of the powerful film documentary, *The San Patricios*, produced and directed by Mark Day of Vista, California. Mark boldly revealed the hidden history of the San Patricios to a broader international audience.



Cinco de Mayo parade

(The IMA St. Patrick's Day Parade Unit features in the documentary). The first IMA showing was enthusiastically received by the traditional Irish Literary and Historical Society. The second showing at the public interest New College of San Francisco was wildly applauded by the activist audience, who subsequently settled down during a panel discussion with Robert Ryal Miller, author of *Shamrock and Sword*, *The Saint Patrick's Battalion in the US-Mexican War* and Professor Don Jordan, historian. The third showing at the Pickleweed Community Center in suburban San Rafael, North of San Francisco, received a very mixed response. The Latino section of the audience cheered. Some of the Anglo audience booed the film, and hissed and booed when the Mexican Consul General, César Lajud, and Mexican Vice Consul, José Aguilar Salazar were introduced. (The authors of the California Legislative State Proposition 187, which was intended to withdraw educational and health services to undocumented immigrants, were the leaders of the booing). This was not a captive audience.

IMA participated in an Immigrant Rights Anti-Prop. 187 demonstration, marching down San Francisco's Market Street. (Prop. 187 was approved by California voters, but was ultimately declared unconstitutional by the courts). IMA members also participated in a 'Hunger Strike for Immigrant Rights' at the San Francisco Federal Building to generate opposition to anti-immigrant bills in the United States Congress.

IMA sponsored two events regarding the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which concluded the war known in the US as the Mexican American War, and known in Mexico as the War of Intervention.

The first Treaty event was an academic exercise with a panel including Armando Rendon, author, and Enrique Ramírez, attorney, hosted by instructor David Vela at the Dominican University, San Rafael. The author of Prop. 187, Rick Oltman, attended and video-taped the event, with permission, after promising a copy of his tape to the organisers. Mr. Oltman never delivered the tape. His underlying fear may be that California's growing Mexican immigrant population may some day be persuaded that the Mexican American War was unjust, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was unfair and the proper course of action would be for Mexico to reclaim California.



Commemoration of Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1998)

The second Treaty event was a lively affair at the Garment Workers' Union Hall in San Francisco, with two musical groups, 'Black Indians' (a Chicano group) and 'Orla and the Gas Men' (an Irish group), Aztec dancers, and speakers including San Francisco Supervisor, José Medina and La Raza Immigrant Rights Leader, Renée Saucedo. Following the event, throngs of young Latinos and Latinas were taking pictures with Mexican and Irish flags, but when a US-American flag was brought forward they ran from it. Eight years later, in 2005, Latino leaders energetically asserted belief in the promise of the US-American flag and encouraged flying it at immigrant rights demonstrations across the US. The identity quest evolves.

IMA sponsored a reading by Armando Rendon, author of *Chicano Manifesto* at City Library, Mill Valley, California. Perhaps Armando's most salient point was that many Spanish and Mexican land grants were not honoured after the Mexican American War. He was challenged by

progressives about why grants of land that the Spanish and Mexicans took from the Native Americans should be honoured.

IMA sponsored several 'Pachanga Craics' - 'Mexican Irish Social Mixers' in San Francisco. Warm and interesting Mixers were held at:

- House of Shields, Old San Francisco Financial District Restaurant
- Andora Inn Cola Cabana Restaurant, Jewel of the Mission District, Mexican Restaurant. This restaurant was originally McCarthy's Irish Bar.
- Dylan's Welsh Pub, Mission District.
- Kate O'Brien's, Irish Pub and Restaurant, Financial District.
- Napper Tandy's, Irish Pub and Restaurant, Mission District.

IMA supported the 31 October 1998 Actors Theatre of San Francisco brilliant production of Chris Mathew's *A Flag to Fly* directed by Bruce Mackey.



Cinco de Mayo parade

Educational Trips and Celebrations

IMA undertook several educational trips including:

June 1996 - Two-day Immigrant Rights Border Tour, in San Diego and Tijuana, led by Mark Day. IMA received presentations by US Government Border Patrol Officer Scott Marvin on 'Operation Gatekeeper', had meetings with California Assemblywoman, Denise Moreno Ducheny, Committee on Californian/Mexican Affairs and Dr. Jorge Bustamante, El Colegio de la Frontera, had briefings with human rights attorneys Roberto Martínez and Claudia Smith, and attended the annual commemoration festivities at Tijuana Cemetery for 'Juan Soldado, Unofficial Patron Saint of Undocumented Immigrants', with regional 'bandas' from all over Mexico. Some border residents credit 'Johnny the Soldier' with miraculous intervention in their lives.

July 1996 - Visit to original Spanish land grant of IMA member, Plácido Salazar, in Pueblo, New Mexico.

November 1996 - Visit to lecture and exhibit 'Distant Relations: Irish, Mexican and Chicano Art,' organised by Trish Ziff, curator, Santa Monica, California.

September 1997 - 150th anniversary of the end of the Mexican American War and remembrance ceremony at Plaza San Jacinto, San Angel, Mexico City, presided over by Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, with Irish Ambassador Sean O'Huiginn, honouring the San Patricios who were executed in 1847 by the US military. Sixteen Irish Mexican Association members from California symbolised the sixteen San Patricios hung in Plaza San Jacinto.

30 November to 5 December 1998 - Several IMA members participated in the delegation group of the San Francisco Business Development and Friendship Mission to Mexico City and Acapulco with Mayor Willie Brown.

July 2000 - Visit to Ireland by Irish Mexican Association Co-ordinator Patrick Goggins and his wife, Ute Goggins. Breakfast meeting with Mexican Ambassador to Ireland, Daniel Dultzin, at his residence in Dublin on Mexican Election Day, 4 July 2000, and Fourth of July luncheon party at the residence of the US Ambassador to Ireland, Michael Sullivan, accompanied by Ambassador Dultzin and Irish author Tim Pat Coogan.

May 2005 – Several IMA members participated in the Irish Forum tour of Ireland, north and south, with emphasis on the northern conflict. IMA group visits included a Refugee Centre in Dublin and the San Patricio Monument, Clifden, Connemara, County Galway, home of Captain John Reilly, leader of the San Patricios.





Visit to John Reilly San Patricio monument, Clifden, County Galway (2005)

IMA sponsored altars at the Día de los Muertos annual celebrations in San Rafael. IMA Altar themes, on separate years, have honoured:

- Low riders, with cars and bicycles
- Victims of wars
- Spirits of the animals
- TexMex families
- Immigrants
- San Patricios
- Irish and Latin Writers

2000 – 2006 IMA has co-sponsored the annual Cinco de Mayo Irish Mexican celebration. Proceeds benefit Centro Latino Services for the Elderly, which serves over 30,000 meals a year in the San Francisco Mission District. Latino and Irish

members of the San Francisco Fire, Police and Sheriff Departments are honoured. Superb entertainment is provided by Irish and Mexican musical and dancing troupes, including young children. Centro Latino President Chuck Ayala and Executive Director, Gloria Bonilla preside. Many public officials participate, including San Francisco Sheriff Michael Hennessey, San Francisco Treasurer José Cisneros, Irish Consul General Emer Deane, Mexican Consul General Alfonso de María and Mexican Vice Consul, Bernardo Méndez.

IMA members represent the organisation at various community events. For example, David Vela, in his capacity as Irish Mexican Association Secretario and as Vice President of the Irish Literary and Historical Society, made a special Cinco de Mayo presentation at Johnny Foley's Irish House on 5 May 2000, to outgoing Irish Consul General, Kevin Conmy. The occasion was a farewell party, with a reading by his wife, Siobhán Campbell, of her work *The Cold That Burns*, and *Una Celebración con Escritores Irlandeses* (A Celebration with Irish Writers), including Thomas Flanagan, author of *Year of the French*.

Irish Mexican Association participants also undertake outreach activities. David Vela is a fine ideal. As a teacher of literature, he went beyond the classroom, hosted an IMA event, met the Irish Literary and Historical Society in the process, delivered to the Society his signature lecture on the 'Influence of James Joyce on Latin American Writers,' became President of the Society, went to France, taught there, returned to San Francisco and delivered to the Society his lecture on Samuel Beckett and French.

While the Irish Mexican Association of San Francisco has received invitations from across the US and elsewhere to become an umbrella institution for Irish Mexican organisations, IMA remains an informal network of volunteers. IMA activities, frequently spontaneous, in support and promotion of inter-cultural activities, are appreciated by many.

Those who contact the Irish Mexican Association often ask if it is an association of individuals who have both Irish and Mexican blood, or if it is an organisation of Irish people coming together with Mexican people. The answer, of course, is both of the above and something in between. Sussing out the orientation of each questioner is intriguing, because somewhere within the question and the answer is an unknown factor, which the caller cares about beyond articulation. That is what he or she seeks. A feeling more than an idea. It is extraordinary sometimes to see the look in their eyes when they come to IMA and find it.

Patrick Goggins
Co-ordinator, Irish Mexican Association