

Irish Americans

A look at the



"Top of the morning to ye on this gray, grizzly St. Patrick's Day afternoon. Kent O'Brockman, live on Main Street, where today everyone is a little bit Irish, except, of course, for the gays and the Italians."

Kent Brockman in *The Simpsons*.

CD track 23 - Irishman and Bostonian woman

March 17th. St Patrick's Day. Ireland's national holiday, celebrated all over Ireland, and in a thousand and one cities and towns all over the US. According to recent statistics there are more than 40 million people of **Irish descent** in the US (about ten times the current population of Ireland). And the Irish are the most influential group in political terms. Find out why.

American Communities

If you ever go to America, you'll soon see why it's famous for being a country of immigrants. Everywhere you'll find tiny communities of people from Poland, India, Italy and hundreds of other countries from around the world with their own little bars, shops and **places of worship**.

The Irish may not be the most distinct culture (apart from the Irish bars). But every year, on 17th March, the country stops for the St Patrick's Day celebrations. It's the time of year when anyone who claims to have a bit of Irish blood (about 40 million people) puts on something green, and **downs** a pint of Guinness in honour of Ireland's **national patron**, Saint Patrick. Why, in multicultural America, are the Irish the only nationality allowed to **dye** the **Hudson** green? Is it because all the New York **cops** are of Irish descent? The city certainly doesn't stop to celebrate Italy's patron saints, **let alone** the Jewish Passover or Chinese New Year. So what is it with the Irish?

History of Irish in America

The Irish have been emigrating to America for centuries. In 1700 and 1800s Irishmen helped build the **railroads**, **mined** the **Rockies**, and **staffed** the police and fire services in most major cities.

In 1829, the first Irish American president, Andrew Jackson, **took office** in the White House. He was the only President whose parents were both immigrants to America – they came from Carrickfergus, a little town near Belfast.



Potato Famine

The largest **influx** came during the mid to late 19th century. Millions of Irish were forced to **flee** their homes. At that time, the potato was the **staple crop**, but a terrible **potato blight** left the country **devastated** and **starving**. As a result, millions left for America. This transformed the Irish into the biggest ethnic group; and by 1850, 26 per cent of New York residents were Irish – most of them living in **slums** on the Lower East Side.

At this time, the biggest influence made by the Irish was in fighting for their rights. Many of them had low-paid jobs in dangerous and unjust conditions. They formed unions and helped improve the overall situation.



Meanwhile, the Irish, with their strong ties to tradition and community, **took refuge** in institutions such as the Catholic Church, the Democratic Party and the Ancient Order of Hibernians (the AOH) which was **founded** in 1836. When New York adopted a full-time police force in 1845, the **recruits** were **overwhelmingly Irish**.

Anger

But as the numbers grew, so did the **resentment**. The most organised anti-Irish group was The American Party - known popularly as "The Know-Nothing Party", founded in 1843. The group used the anti-Irish sentiment to gain support, but only for a short period.

In response, the AOH (the Ancient Order of Hibernians) organised an especially large St Patrick's Day parade in 1853 in New York. The following year, 1854, AOH **ranks** were **swelled** by Irish units of the State militia who gave it protection. By the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, the parade had already grown to be the **focal point** for Irish activities in New York.