

**Comhaltas Ceóltoirí Éireann  
Tom Finucane Branch  
Rochester, New York**



**Newsletter**

December 2015

Nollaig  
2015

An organization  
dedicated to the  
advancement of  
traditional Irish music,  
language, dance and  
culture

*Special Memorial Edition*  
*for Marty O'Keefe*

This newsletter is dedicated to Marty O'Keefe to celebrate his legacy and influence on the traditions of Irish music and culture in the Rochester community.

This newsletter features a biographical essay by Chris Brennan as well as poems, notes and photographs featuring memories and celebration of Marty and his impact on individuals and the community.



Marty O'Keefe plays on State Street in 1998. (Roch.D&C file photo)



Branch website: [www.irishrochester.com](http://www.irishrochester.com)  
Facebook: rochester irish musicians association

**The Tradition Walked Among Us:  
Martin O'Keefe of Rochester, New York  
(1 November 1912-5 November 2015)**

Christopher Brennan

Martin O'Keefe was born on the Feast of All Saints, 1 November 1912, in Querrin, Co. Clare. In the ancient Irish calendar 1 November was the Feast of Samhain, the Celtic New Year, when the curtain between the spirit world and the material world was thinnest, when the spirits of those who went before could walk among the living. In the same way Martin served as the tradition walking among us; the embodiment of the musical tradition bearers long gone before.

“Marty,” as he was known to his friends and colleagues, was the third of four children born to James O'Keefe (1878?-27 August 1943) and his wife Katie (1882?-23 January 1930). All three of his siblings preceded him to the United States. Both his brother John J. “Jack” O'Keefe (12 May 1906-23 January 1994, himself a renowned Rochester traditional musician) and sister Kathleen O'Keefe (later Mrs. Robert Emmett Downs, 10 June 1909-25 February 1993) were already in Rochester by 1930. His younger sister Maureen O'Keefe (called “Mary” by the family, later Mrs. John Francis Egan, 1 January 1916-22 February 1950) arrived in the United States in 1931, settling in Westchester County, New York (north of New York City). Marty's mother was a housewife, while James began his working life as a fisherman, later working as a riverboat pilot (like James' father Dennis before him), guiding commercial ships from the Atlantic up the Shannon into Limerick town. Leaving school at 14, Marty continued in the family trade of life on the water, fishing in the Shannon River in a curragh (the traditional Irish hide-covered boats), plying for herring, mackerel, pollack, salmon and lobster. His main ambition at this stage of his life was simply to earn enough money to afford a boat larger than a curragh in which to fish.

Sometime between 1937 and 1940 (when Marty was in his late 20s) he moved to England to find a better job. In the years before the war, he divided his time between leveling cement for a building contractor and returning to Ireland each spring to fish. When “the Phony War” that followed the invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II ended in the spring of 1940 and fighting began in earnest, Marty was unable to leave Clare, and he resumed full-time the life of a curragh fisherman. Following the death of his father in 1943 and the end of the war in 1945, Marty sought to come to America in search of economic opportunity.

He arrived in New York in 1947, by way of Newfoundland, Canada, on one of the first trans-Atlantic propeller planes out of Shannon Airport. His first stop was the County Line Cabin (Baldwin Place, New York), a bar and restaurant owned by his sister Mary that straddled Westchester and Putnam Counties. Mary set him up in an apartment attached to the restaurant, and Marty earned money waiting tables and serving drinks. He still hoped to earn enough to buy a boat larger than a curragh and return home.

Life had other plans. Also working at the County Line Cabin was Mary Theresa Curley (2 May 1931-27 May 1998), a young waitress from Tuam, Co. Galway who was 19 years younger than he. Theresa did not care for drink or fishing and had no intention of returning to Ireland. Marty fell in love with Theresa, giving up his idea of returning to the life he knew. Following the death of his sister Mary (O'Keefe) Egan (22 February 1950) and that of her husband John Francis Egan (22 February 1898-15 February 1949) the previous year, the restaurant was sold and Marty's employment prospects dried up.



Marty and Theresa then moved to Rochester, New York later in 1950, where each found employment. The couple were married 23 October 1954. In time Marty and Theresa had eight children: John O'Keefe; Martin O'Keefe; Jerry O'Keefe; James O'Keefe; Mary (O'Keefe) Kohlmeier; Kathleen (O'Keefe) Peters; Noreen (O'Keefe) Flanagan; and Colleen (O'Keefe) Barnes.

Among the things he brought to this country was his musical talents. As a boy he learned to play his mother's concertina (an instrument for women in those days) and his brother Jack's fiddle. Also in the home was a tin whistle, and in time he learned to play the wooden flute as well (although a later accident ended his ability to play that instrument). He also acquired the traditional art of liling, singing tunes to nonsense syllables instead of words. Traditionally liling the melody enabled dancers to perform the steps even when no musicians were present. In some communities liling also served as a counterpoint to the melody even as other instruments were in play (a common practice in Marty's youth). Marty used liling in the latter sense in solo performance. In broader sessions Marty would also lilt to communicate a tune whose title he might not know to other musicians ("Do you know this tune?" after which he would lilt it).

Marty did not learn these skills by osmosis. His mother and other musicians in the area around Querrin would teach him tunes and he would return home and practice until he had mastered them. Occasionally he would also pick up tunes from itinerant musicians passing through the area. What made his education that much more remarkable was that he never learned to read musical notation (and it is likely his instructors never did either), and in that era no recording devices (either tape or digital) were commonly available. Regarding Marty's musical education, friend and fellow musician Joe Dady was quoted as saying, "I remember him telling me about when he was learning the fiddle. He used to ride his bike 10 or 15 miles from his house for a lesson, then have to whistle the tune all the way home to remember it." Marty was the living embodiment of the Irish oral musical tradition, learning tunes by ear, not by sight.



Cathy McGrath, Marty, Mike Ryan  
Photo by Dan McGrath



Marty's family, 1970s. Photo: O'Keefe

**Editor's note:** every attempt has been made to provide appropriate credit for the photos. Permission has been obtained from the Rochester D&C for their photos, some people sent photos and I credited them as the source; other photos come from unknown sources.



His dedication to his musical education and training continued even after his mother's death due to heart problems in 1930. The tradition at the time was that family members grieved for a year following the death of a loved one, and frivolities like music were not to be enjoyed during the interim. Noting his great love for the music, however, his mother told him before she died to ignore the custom. He did not play in public during the interim, but he continued to practice, fitting a comb over the strings to dull the sound, so passersby would not hear.

Having been reared and tutored in southwest Clare, Marty's playing was noted for preserving the West Clare style of fiddle playing, including finger rolls, bending notes, and intentional shading of both flats and sharps. In concertina playing, West Clare playing is highly rhythmical and melodically simple, with single-row fingering techniques and repertoire including reels, jigs (including slip jigs and triple jigs), hornpipes, marches, polkas, slides, set pieces and flings. Marty's playing on the instrument exhibited these styles.

Because present-day Clare style is a blend of traditional East and West Clare styles, Marty was long recognized as a preserver of the distinct style of play of West Clare. For that he has been honored both in Ireland and in the United States. In his nearly annual trips back to Ireland, he has performed at the Willie Clancy Summer School (Scoil Samhraidh Willie Clancy) and been interviewed on Clare FM radio. He is featured in a museum in Miltown Malbay honoring local musicians, and in 1998 he was part of the inaugural inductee class of the North East Region Hall of Fame of the North American Province of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. He also served twice as Grand Marshall of the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Rochester, in 1985 and again in 2011. To demonstrate the love and respect in which he was held by the community, two major birthday celebrations were held for him, one for his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday (2007) and one for his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday (2012). One of his friends and fellow musicians, Cathy McGrath, also wrote a poem in his honor, using fishing and music to describe what it was like to be with Marty.

### **Fisherman**

For Martin O'Keefe

**You can hear it like a mumbling river  
the murmur of the bar,  
"Buachaill ón Éirne" streaming from the jukebox,  
like a silken line with hook.  
Chairs rub on wood floor  
like small boats hauled onto the shore.  
Lean across and note:  
Marty,  
the tuneful tweed of his cap  
bouncing on waves of words,  
smoke floating up the dark wood,  
across reedy green walls,  
his hands rising and falling as if rowing  
after his voice,  
sideways nod, sip, measured sigh,  
amused flick under whitecap eye brows,  
sea angler landing a whopper.**

by Cathy McGrath  
Dec 29, 2012



Given the love and honor shown to him, it is ironic that his gifts almost went unrecognized. Upon arrival in the United States, he thought that to become assimilated to his new country he had to give up the fiddle. As he later explained it, “One thing is that you come into a strange country, you think ... that 'who wants it' business. You're kind of shy in bothering people with 'Come All Yes.’” Later on he recognized that this was a tradition handed on to him, one for which he had a responsibility to preserve. In his words, “After a while you say to yourself ... well, this is *traditional*. They may not understand it, but it is traditional.”

Rochester was a formative factor in reviving Marty's interest in playing. When he moved to the area, he met other local Irish musicians, with whom he played at dances, house parties, and events sponsored by local Irish organizations. By his own admission Marty “filled in” for those events, but did not play consistently until 1961 when his children began dancing at feiseanna. His ardor revived, he was one of the initial members of the Irish Musicians Club (IMC) when it was formally organized 14 September 1973 at the Harp's Club (the local headquarters of the Gaelic Athletic Association in Rochester). The IMC became an official branch of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in 1986. Today it is known as the Tom Finucane Branch. In 2001, three days after his 89<sup>th</sup> birthday, he finished recording his solo CD, *Dawn in the Hills of Ireland*, a recording featuring his concertina and fiddle playing. He also played a supportive role on other recordings by other Irish musicians in the area. Even at the age 101 he continued to participate in sessions and had no trouble remembering and playing the hundreds of tunes in his repertoire.

For Marty, music was so much a part of his ethnic identity, such a part of his vision of himself as an Irishman, he believed he would play music no matter where he was from. As he explained it, “I suppose if I was born in Poland ... I'd probably be playing Polish polkas.” Traditional music was his gift to us, a gift that was always important to him and because of which it will always be important in the lives of all who knew and loved him.



Marty, Seamus Connolly, Ted McGraw



George Walker & Marty at McGraw's  
Photo: Cathy McGrath

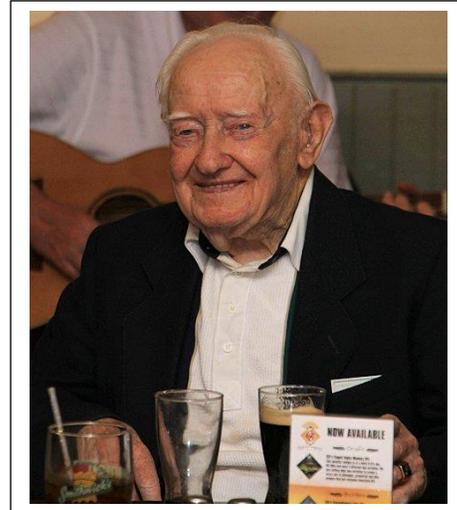


Marty 7-31-2015. Photo: Ted McGraw



For the past several years, however, health issues had slowed him down, making attendance at local sessions more difficult. To include Marty, musicians had to come to his home to play, but even that became more difficult as time passed. While his musical spirit was willing, his body continued to weaken. Marty O'Keefe died four days following his 103<sup>rd</sup> birthday, 5 November 2015 in Rochester. His wake and funeral were attended by literally hundreds of family, friends and fellow musicians who loved and honored him for his contributions to Irish music in Rochester.

It was at the funeral that another aspect of Marty's life was revealed that was unknown to all but his family and closest friends. His deep and personal devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, and to Saints Theresa and Padre Pio. He attended daily Mass when his health permitted, and family life ended each day with a daily rosary. He strove to live life as God would have him live it. Appropriate for one born on the Feast of All Saints, those he leaves behind have no doubt that upon approaching the Pearly Gates Martin will hear the Divine Invitation he so longed to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant ... Enter into the joy of your master."





### Marty O'Keefe leaves behind a wonderful legacy

Marty O'Keefe, an Irishman who immigrated to America, lived a life many of us are strangers to. He lived to be 103 years old in a home four generations of his family shared with him. He was loved, respected, and admired by many people.

His music, faith and family were his bedrock. I loved his generosity and patience as I sat next to him learning how to play Irish traditional music.

His devotion to his Catholic faith was a topic he was happy to speak of. His family was of paramount importance. His life was a garment of wholeness that had been woven generations ago. He understood the idea of custom and what it is to be truly human. His family's devotion allowed us all to be a part of his life in various ways for so many years. It is with much gratitude and warmth that I will remember Marty O'Keefe.

**Jean Jesserer Smith**



### Marty ...

He was a fisherman come to us from the shore of Erin

With a fiddle in his hands and a concertina at his side

With lilting that danced upon our ears therein

Not a tune did he seem to not know

A pint not far from reach

Always with a story and quick wit

And along with so many, I am honored to say,

I got to play with him at numerous sessions

Shared some pints and heard some stories

Celebrated a life of over 100 years

There will never be another like him

God bless you Marty O'Keefe!

**Alan Eldridge**



At his CD re-release party, Marty and I had stepped outside for a smoke. We were approached by a woman we didn't know who asked "So, what's the secret of a long life?" I would have reacted with annoyance, but Marty graciously thought for a moment, and then said "Forgive your enemies."

**Howie Lester**





GCVM Fiddlers' Fair photo: Hallahan



Marty & Ted McGraw playing on Main Street, 1997  
Rochester D&C file photo

For me Marty has been 40 years of inspiration and example of how to live life richly for myself and those around me.

**Michael Leach**

I didn't know Marty personally, but remember him well since the Friendship Tavern days of the late 80's. He shared his musical, sparkling spirit with all and continued to do so for as long as the Lord would allow! I spoke with him several times and consider myself blessed for having had his acquaintance!

**Julie Clayton**

I never saw so many Irish people together and in agreement as I did at Marty's 100th. A fine tribute indeed!

**Elizabeth Osta**  
**Past President IACI**



Marty at the Friendship Tavern, 1980



**Querrin, County Clare**

As I watched the tide flow in the creek  
 Wherein bygone days I stood  
 And played upon the pebble beach oft times in the mornin'  
 My memory takes me to the spot and the friends who joined me there  
 As we played upon the Shannon banks at Querrin County Clare  
 Oh silly as those games now seem, we played them there each day  
 Before returning to our homes, the rosary to say.

It seemed to be a lot of fun just because our homes were there  
 Upon the lovely Shannon banks of Querrin County Clare  
 The curraghs leave the old gray pier as the sun it goes to rest  
 They cast their nets into the deep, each man where he knows best  
 They pray and hope that God will grant an answer to each prayer  
 And fill those nets with silvery fish at Querrin County Clare.

When the seagulls to land or flock, or the bar at Beale is broke  
 Or the Kerry Mountains wear a cap, it's bad for the fisher folk  
 When Tarbert light is shining bright, and off the west is clear  
 They'll sail again from the old gray pier at Querrin County Clare.

Some go off to foreign land to seek their fortune there  
 While others sail the seven seas; they're young and have no care  
 But at night time 'for going to rest, I'm sure their thoughts are there  
 Upon the lovely Shannon banks of Querrin County Clare.

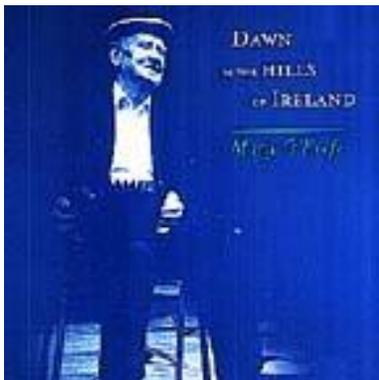
By Marty O'Keefe

**GIFTS TO YOU FROM HIMSELF**



**Marty O'Keefe's Brown Bread**

- 1 ½ cup white flour
- 1 ½ cup wheat flour
- 3 tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp salt
- 3 rounded tbsp. sugar
- 3 sticks of butter or margarine
- 1 egg beaten
- 1 cup buttermilk
- ½ cup raisins



Marty's CD:  
**Dawn of the Hills of Ireland**

Combine dry ingredients, soften or melt butter/margarine and combine with the egg and buttermilk. Add raisins to dry ingredients and combine with wet. Mix well until it holds together in a ball and knead gently on floured surface. (kneading is not required but helps it hold together and slice better) Place in a round pan and cut a cross in the top of the loaf. Bake at 350 for 1 hour. Sometimes I replace about 3 tbsp of the wheat flour with some pulverized oats or crushed bran cereal for a little different flavor.

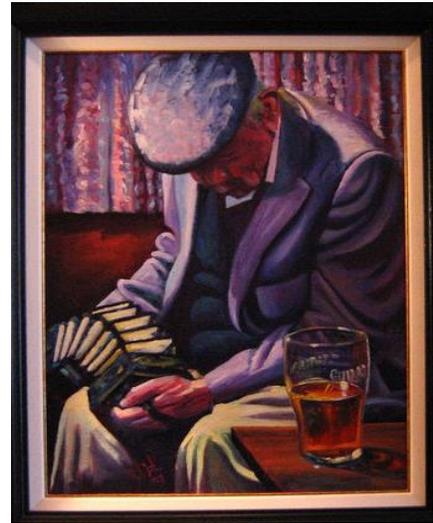
"... and that's it now. Cross it, bless it, bake it, share it."

~ Marty

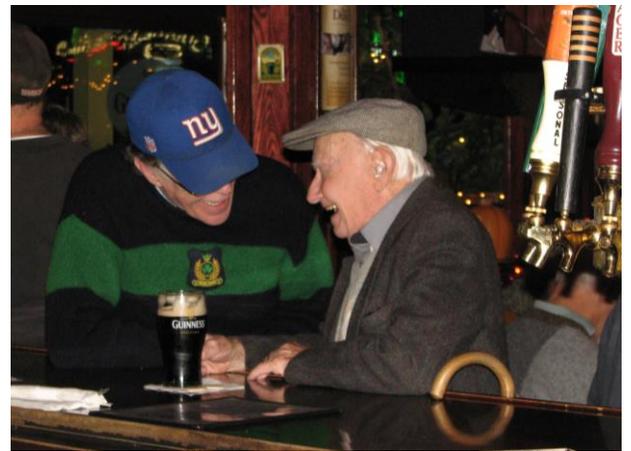




Marty, Joe Dady, Brian Clancy



Marty O'Keefe starts up an Irish song as fellow musician Lynn Pilaroscia picks up the tune during an Irish jam session at Carroll's Bar in 2004. Max Schulte, Rochester D&C photographer



Dan McGrath and Marty. Photo: Cathy McGrath



Mary Lester & Marty

**You are invited** for a "Month's Mind" celebration in memory of Marty O'Keefe, Saturday, December 5th at Carroll's (1768 East Main St in Rochester).

A **ceili** will be held from 3 to 5 pm with music provided by the 'Clare Ceili Band', a talented group of a few of Marty's friends gathered for the occasion. A **session** begins at 7 pm. All are welcome to play tunes or just stop by.

Details of the event are on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/events/637789556323457/>

**Hosted by** Rochester Irish Arts, Rochester Irish Musician's Association/Tom Finucane Branch of CCE, and Carroll's Bar and Restaurant.

