

The story of Pat Rodgers and his one-man parade

Fort Mill character marked St. Patrick's Day all by himself

NEARBY HISTORY



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Past: A History of Fort Mill, South Carolina, 1600-1980.

Since that time the book has been updated four times, the last time in 1997. It still sells well and

is a "must have" for Fort Mill newcomers, of which there are many these days.

One of the book's most colorful characters was Pat Rodgers, a native of Ireland, who appeared in Fort Mill around 1915. Pat set up a "pressing club," an old term for dry-cleaning establishments but, according to the 1930 Census, Pat did "hand washing."

Pat's building was where Hardee's is currently located on Tom Hall Street. (Tom Hall Street was known as Booth Street when Pat first arrived in Fort Mill. Booth Street was named for John Wilkes Booth, assassin of President Lincoln but the name was changed after World War I to honor Tom Hall, a Medal of Honor winner who was a native of Fort Mill.)

Every March 17, Pat, all by himself, staged a St. Patrick's Day parade. Mr. Bradford wrote a delightful description of Pat's preparation for the parade: "He would fortify himself, don his green shirt and green suit, fortify himself, and put on his green shoes and green spats. He would then fortify himself and place his green derby atop his head. Then, with his red tie matching his red nose, he would take his tambourine down from the shelf, fortify himself, and the parade was assembled.

"It would begin at the front door of his pressing club with Pat marching in measured, if uncertain, steps up the middle of the road. ... Pat would make a left turn from Tom Hall Street into Main, constantly holding the tambourine out in front and

whacking it sharply at regular intervals."

Pat also was speaking in an unintelligible language that might have been "some sort of special Leprechaun dialect." But occasionally his audience picked up the words "Blarney stone" and "Killarney."

He would march to the bottom of the Main Street hill, turn around and make his way back to his place and spent a few minutes inside (undoubtedly fortifying himself) and march out and repeat the parade. "The parade would continue as long as Pat could walk. Sometimes he would make five or six round trips. ... His audience on the streets often bet on how many trips Pat could manage. Mr. Bradford's father, William Bradford Sr., wrote in the Times

in 1920 about Pat Rodgers. He called Pat "clothes cleaner extraordinary and mirth-maker par excellence" and reported that Pat believed that the battles between Great Britain and Ireland were not about religion as many thought, but instead were about home rule. Pat told Mr. Bradford Sr. that since the United States had implemented Prohibition (Pat's words were "gone dry"), he had much more time to think about serious subjects.

Pat, aged 67 years, died, while seated in a rocking chair at the home of L.E. Perry in the "lower mill village" (area around the White Plant of Springs Cotton Mills), according to an obituary published in the Fort Mill Times, March 23, 1931.

The obituary said Pat was born in Ireland but the 1930

Census gave his birthplace as North Ireland and gave his financial worth as \$10. The obituary termed Pat as "village dry cleaner and tailor for many years." Pat was thought to have a sister in Philadelphia and was known to have a brother, Anthony, and a sister, Mrs. Susan McHough, in Donegal County, Ireland.

Bradford Jr. ended his account of Pat Rodgers' life in Fort Mill with, "He left no insurance or funds for funeral expenses, so friends made contributions to cover the cost of a casket. He now lies somewhere in an unmarked grave in Unity Cemetery" in Fort Mill.

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