MY AIN FOLK

The Scottish Heart of St. Louis

Written and photographed by Dan Marshall

An unmistakable visceral sound emerges from the back of St. Peter's Church in St. Louis, overtakes a procession of colorful flags and banners, and fills the sanctuary. It is a strident, powerful rendition of "Scotland the Brave," played by a dozen tartan-clad bagpipers and drummers of the mers of the Invera'an Pipe Band.

When the music stops, the priest reads a list of Scottish clans, asking people to rise as their clan is named. Soon the entire congregation—many of them wearing kilts—stands, and the minister blesses them. He emphasizes the unity of the community gathered there, likening it to the many colored threads in plaid kilts, which combine to create a strong, beautiful cloth.

This event is an American adaptation of an ancient Scottish tradition now rarely held in its place of origin. Centuries ago, Scottish clansmen would gather at the local church for a blessing before battle. They wore the symbol of their clan, a kilt made from cloth with a unique plaid design, known as a tartan. Since Scots called a church a "kirk," the event became known as a Kirkin' o' the Tartans.

Scottish Americans typically hold Kirkin' o' the Tartans on the Sunday nearest to St. Andrew's Day (November 30). As the patron saint of Scotland, he is also the namesake of the local Scottish cultural organization, the Scottish St. Andrew Society of Greater St. Louis.

A small presence in a city of over two million, Scots in St. Louis have reached out to maintain and develop their traditions, centered around the St. Andrew Society and the Invera'an Pipe Band. Like the community the priest describes, the clan of St. Louis Scots weaves together many elements to make up its tartan: Devotion to bagpipe music, enthusiasm for Scottish folk dancing, and love of traditional foods are but a few of the wide bands on a field dyed deeply with the love of Scottish culture.

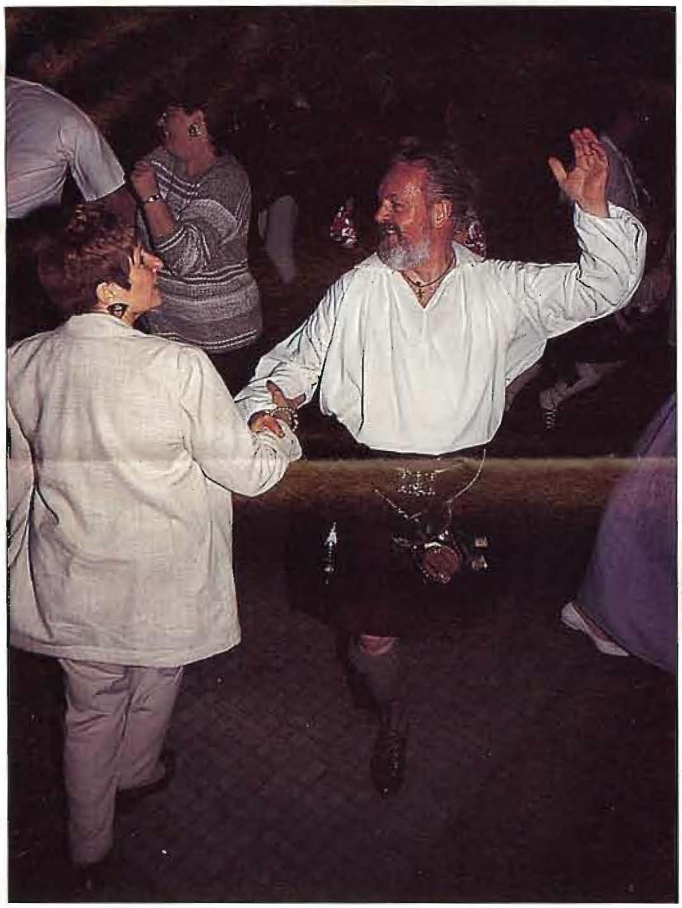
Unwilling to sacrifice vitality for the sake of form, this community requires no specific ancestry for membership. They

■ Erin English, an accomplished Highland dancer from St. Louis.

recognize their own not by the cloth in each other's kilts but by the generosity and warmth of their behavior. Several hundred members strong, this unofficial clan preserves and shares the Scottish heart of St. Louis.

A small, vibrant community

Though Scots have been coming to America since before the Revolutionary War, large numbers never congregated in St. Louis. In 1890, a peak



■ **Peter and Marilyn Geery enjoy Scottish country dancing at the ceilidh.**

of 1,370 native-born Scots called St. Louis home; ninety years later, little more than 400 lived there.

Even so, Scots banded together from the start, founding a Caledonia Society in 1853 and the first American Clan Campbell and Clan MacDonald lodges in 1878 and 1880. They also displayed their culture to all St. Louisans, sponsoring Highland games as early as 1867.

As the children and grandchildren of Scottish emigrants adapted to America, ties to Scotland weakened and old traditions dwindled and faded away. Wishing to blend in, some Scots struggled to lose their brogue; the remainder lost the critical mass necessary to sustain the cultural organizations. The successor to the Caledonia Society Highland games eventually sputtered out in the 1950s.

St. Louis Scots might never have gathered together again, if a soldier from Missouri hadn't met an ambitious Scottish butcher in Glasgow. In 1943, the Allies were massing troops in Great Britain for the invasion of Europe. Bill Stirrat and his recent bride, Agnes, lived in a house across the street from rows of Quonset huts housing American soldiers. One night, Stirrat met Jack Edelman at the bus stop and invited him over for dinner.

As their friendship developed, Edelman enchanted Stirrat with glowing descriptions of America. Eager to quit his job as a butcher and discouraged by the lack of opportunity for advancement in Scotland, Stirrat quickly accepted Edelman's invitation to Missouri. Edelman even promised Stirrat a home—free of rent—on an orchard. The American soon left for Germany but kept in touch after the war.

In 1947, Stirrat, his wife, and children sold their house, sailed to America, and took a train to St. Louis. Upon arrival, they found the rent-free house had a tree growing through the roof and the promised orchard had yet to be planted. Despite the cold welcome, Stirrat quickly found a job as a butcher and decided to stay in America for one year. He never left.

"We had more opportunities here than at home," explains 81-year-old Agnes Stirrat. Within seven years, they had purchased their own grocery store. Eager to match their success, some sixty friends and relatives of the Stirrats asked for invitations to St. Louis. Most lived in the Stirrats' basement several months before finding a home. Their efforts did much to bolster the St. Louis Scottish community.

Though the Stirrats raised three chil-

dren and made many friends in St. Louis, something was lacking. "We missed the fact that there wasn't a central place for meeting Scots," says Agnes Stirrat. So in 1972, a group of Scottish-born Americans founded the Scottish St. Andrew Society of Greater St. Louis. Bill Stirrat served as the first president of the organization, which is dedicated to exposing the people of St. Louis to Scottish culture and hospitality and now has 350 members.

The society's largest event, the Burns Night, honors Scottish poet Robert Burns. "It's a big show," says current society president Keith Parle. Each year, some 520 people fill a hotel ballroom and revel in Scottish music, poetry, and food. The Burns Night showcases Scottish culture, or, at least, the American conception of Scottish culture.

In Scotland, Parle explains, "Burns Nights are all male, quite alcoholic, and very serious." The American version features a parade of kilts, bagpipes, and haggis—a traditional Scottish dish—evoking a romantic notion of Scotland. Though the entertainment and food are authentic, most Scots find the essence of their culture in their way of interacting with people. "At most of the functions, we try to get a level of warmth and remove any sense of pretension," says Parle.

Like Burns Night, the Kirkin' o' the Tartans evolved uniquely in America. The society occasionally sponsors a Kirkin', but St. Peter's Episcopal Church holds one annually, in which some society members participate. Alex Sutherland experienced his first Kirkin' in St. Louis, though he was born and raised in Edinburgh. His wife, Carrie, had never even heard of them until she came to St. Louis.

"The one we went to," says Alex Sutherland, "oddly enough, was in an Episcopalian church, which is the last place you would expect, considering the historical problems that the Presbyterians and Episcopalians have had in Scotland."

Just as unusual is the fact that the minister who leads the service, Rev. Jim Metzger, traces his roots to Germany. "I love it because of the pageantry," says Metzger, who jokes that his real name is Jamie McMetzger. He brought the service to St. Louis from his previous position at a joint Episcopalian-Presbyterian church.

Aware of the incongruities of holding a Scottish ceremony in an Episcopalian church, Metzger maintains his enthusiasm for the Kirkin'. "We make it a blessing of all the families," he explains. "We defer to those who are Scottish and then bless the rest."

After attending one Kirkin', Sutherland was ready to accept this uniquely Scottish-American event. "It's great," he says. "I think it's super to have something like it."

Gaelic party

Even so, native-born Scots often long for more than a show of traditional music and dress. Sutherland tells of gatherings back in Scotland—such as New Year's—when the general good mood would move family and friends to song. His grandma Paterson, on such occasions, performed but one selection, "My Ain [Own] Folk."

Leaning forward in his chair, Sutherland sings:

> Far frae [from] my hame [home] I wonder,
> but still my thoughts return,
> to my ain folk way out yonder,
> in the shieling [a small fishing hut] by
> the burn [stream].

Chorus:

Oh, but I'm longing for my ain folk,
though they be but lowly, poor,
and plain folk.
I am far beyond the sea,
but my heart will ever be,
back hame in dear old Scotland,
with my ain folk.

Sutherland's grandmother lived in Scotland all her life, but the sentiment of her favorite song seems common among Scots in St. Louis.

Even after twenty-three years in America, Agnes Stirrat says she "still felt kind of like an outsider. . . . I think the openness in Scotland is more than here." Scots will drop in unannounced on their friends, who take the practice in stride. Says Stirrat, "As soon as the doorbell rings, you put on the kettle [to make tea]."

Having seen America on television before she came, Carrie Sutherland was surprised to experience culture shock. "I was surrounded by people speaking in many ways a different language," she says, "and yet it was basically English." For example, in Scotland a sidewalk is called a pavement and elevators are lifts. Also, Sutherland learned to slow her speech and eliminate certain Scottish expressions when speaking with Americans.

To counteract this need to adapt, the St. Andrew Society provides a place where Scottish culture is the norm. Sutherland has found good friends in St. Louis, but she says, "Sometimes you can be a bit more yourself [with Scots]. You don't have to explain yourself and can just relax."

While the St. Andrew Society clearly exists for Scots, part of its mission, according to Parle, is to "have the people of St. Louis understand what life is like back in Scotland at the grassroots level." A society home page on the World Wide Web (http://www.inverizon.com/scotlink) makes it clear that daily life in Scotland is not full of kilts and bagpipes.

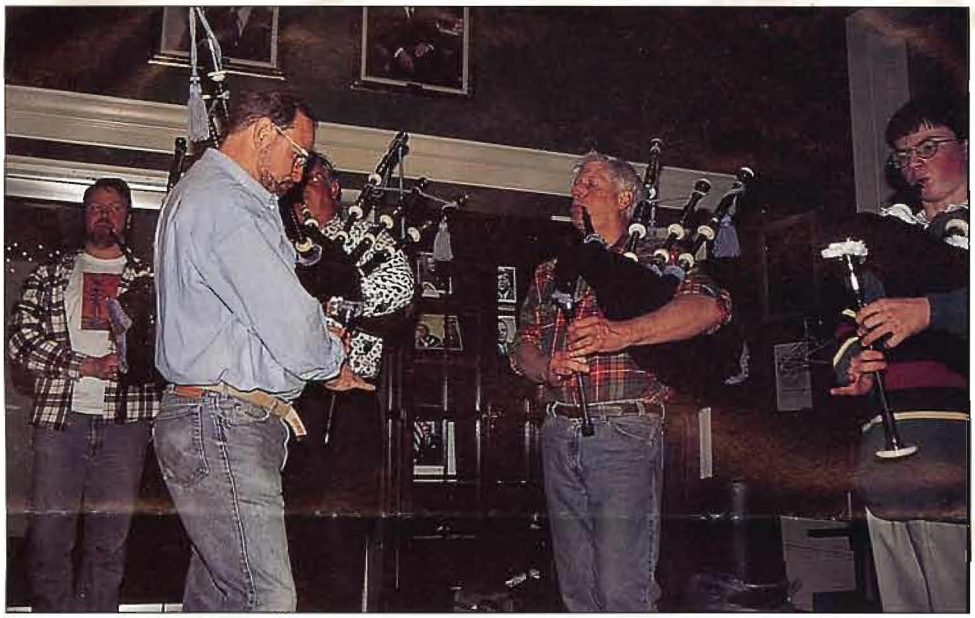
Parle laughs when he admits that he—like many Scots—never bought anything plaid until he came to America. Alex Sutherland explains this behavior: "We know the culture in Scotland. When you're living there, you tend to not even think of it." In America, bits of cultural shorthand, like tartans, satisfy a longing for home.

One traditional event Scots bring with them to St. Louis is known as a *ceilidh* (pronounced KAY-leh), which simply means party in Gaelic. These parties depend on performances from the partygoers for entertainment and include singing, music, jokes, recitation, and dancing as well as food and drink. "The ceilidh . . . with its warmth and hospitality," says Parle, "is the true Scottish event."

"I suppose the basis of the ceilidh . . . is by osmosis," says Sutherland. "You do things because you've done them before. You don't realize necessarily that you're passing something on." Inspired by the evening of dancing and Scottish music, eight-year-old Andrew Gowran takes to the dance floor for the first time with a long series of solo steps. His performance draws loud applause from the crowd, which includes two proud parents.

This succession of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next is aided by the Scottish tradition of multigenerational socializing. "Here you have a baby-sitter all the time," says Stirrat. "In Scotland, you take the children with you."

Since entire families interact with each other at many community events, the result is a greater family, reminiscent of the clans. The older generation serves as a "type of adopted aunt and uncle for the kids," says Parle. "The grownups can



■ **Pipe major Bill Henry (in blue shirt) conducts a rehearsal of the Invera'an Pipe Band.**

mollycoddle them. They bring a little flavor over here that you're missing."

The interchange doesn't flow exclusively from the old to young, especially for those born in America. Laurie Hartung's passion for Scottish culture led her to learn the bagpipes five years ago, though her heritage is French and Swiss. The 45-year-old fondly recalls learning from several teenage pipers in the Invera'an Band. It was an experience that "cut through generation gaps and has enriched my life," says Hartung.

The living art of bagpiping

The mixture between young and old, Scots and non-Scots, has been particularly strong in the pipe band. Band member Vic Masterson points out, "We can't really expect a Scottish player of quality to walk into St. Louis. So we build our own pipers." That feat has given the band a solid reputation rivaling the best bands in America.

The pipe major, chief instructor, and emotional leader of the Invera'an Pipe Band is Bill Henry, a lifelong St. Louisan. Like many Americans, Henry can trace one branch of his family tree back to Scotland. "On my mother's side, the Lindsay [family] is Scottish," he explains. They arrived in America before the Revolution, so Henry considers himself as "indigenous to America as a white man can be." No traditions from the "old country" have survived, though his parents made Henry aware of his Scottish heritage.

As a youngster playing outside one day, Henry first heard the unrecorded sound of bagpipes. Captivated, he undertook an "epic journey" to the next subdivision in search of its source. The piper turned out to be a college student home from a Scottish Presbyterian school. Delighted to learn that bagpipes existed outside of movies like *Gunga Din,* Henry pursued his new love with passion.

Eight years later, he finally ordered a set of pipes by mail from an import store in San Francisco. Old Mr. Caffray, a local baker from Scotland, gave him his first lessons. Henry played at halftime of his high school football games and included a picture of himself, with kilt and pipes, in his yearbook.

He cringes to imagine how he sound-

■ The St. Louis–based Clan MacNicol prepares to take part in a procession at the Highland games held in Springfield, Illinois.

ed then, but as with anyone caught up in a romantic vision, little else mattered. "When you first begin as a piper, you [imagine] yourself playing on every grassy niche [in Scotland] ," says Henry.

During graduate school in Rhode Island, Henry finally found a pipe band to join. "They were horrible," he says. Pipers who take their music seriously credit the poor musicianship of many American bands for souring the public on bagpipes. John Mackie, a bagpipe composer, former member of Invera'an, and one of Henry's best students, finds many bagpipe bands to be little more than "tartan-clad performing monkeys."

Henry returned briefly to St. Louis in 1974, just after the founding of the local pipe band, "Meeting of the Waters." The name was taken from St. Louis' location at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers but was soon translated into Gaelic as Invera'an.

When Henry returned to live in St. Louis in 1976, he became pipe major of the band. By that point he had begun to enter the American piping community, which maintains close ties to Scotland. As the band grew, it invited teachers from America, Canada, and Scotland to train its pipers and drummers. More recently, Henry has made yearly trips to Edinburgh to study with some of the world's greatest pipers.

Henry emphatically makes the case for appreciation of bagpipes as musical instruments, rather than mere symbols of a foreign land. That young piper dreaming of playing on a grassy field among the mist soon becomes a veteran piper who, "doesn't want to be out in some chigger-infested hill [and] would just as soon not have to wear the kilt that's hot and sweaty," according to Henry.

Mackie, who was born in Scotland but came to St. Louis as a boy, acknowledges the role cultural pride played in getting him to take up the bagpipe. Yet he also insists that with the music so international and the piping community so cosmopolitan, "Scotland just happens to be where the pipe came from."

Belying the notion that all bagpipe music is ancient, Henry explains that

most of the tunes played by pipe bands have been composed in this century. Even the venerable standard "Scotland the Brave" is actually an 1860s fiddle tune reset for bagpipes. The truly historic bagpipe music, called *piobaireachd* (pronounced PEA-brach), is played by a solo piper.

As a sign of its vitality, Invera'an contributes to the preservation and growth of contemporary bagpiping. One of Henry's most successful students now plays with the 78th Fraser Highlanders, a Canadian pipe band famed as the first non-Scottish band to claim the world championship.

Mackie also stands out as a talented composer of pipe band music. As he sat in his kitchen several years ago, a two-bar phrase of music came to mind. Mackie wrote a simple march around that phrase, titled "Grand Stand." It has become Invera'an's signature piece; they play it when marching on and off the field at piping competitions.

"I am obviously very proud of my heritage," says Mackie. But "at some point you're focusing on a discipline—it just happens to be Scottish."

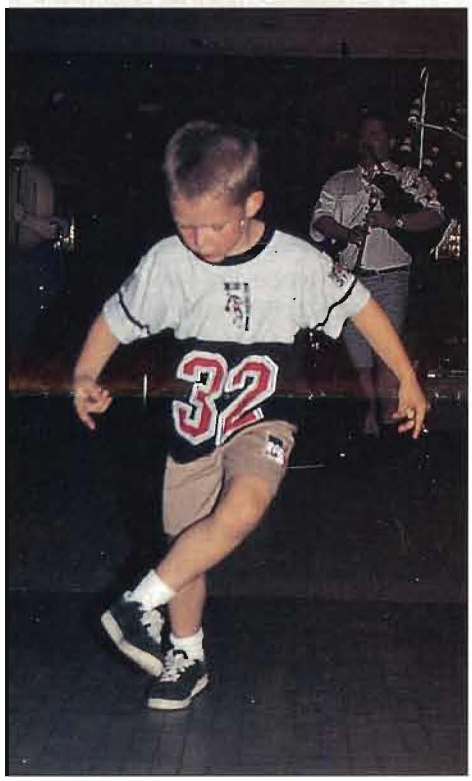
Invera'an, like the best bands in the world, approaches bagpipe music as a living art, rather than a cultural relic. One of Henry's teachers in Scotland advised him, "Your job is get the deaf man at the back of the hall to tap his toe."

St. Andrew Society members, boasting of the band's success, recall a Burns Night several years ago held next door to a bar mitzvah. As the band warmed up in the hallway, guests from the adjacent party befriended members of Invera'an, one of whom is Jewish. After giving a show for the Scots, several pipers took their instruments—and hospitality—next door and played "Hava Nagila" on the bagpipes.

The scene of kilted bagpipers playing a Jewish tune defies cultural stereotypes. Indeed, the members of the Scottish St. Andrew Society and the Invera'an Pipe Band refuse to let Scottish culture become a cliché. Traditions, such as bagpipe music and Kirkin' o' the Tartans, have their roots in ancient forms but are given new life in St. Louis.

In the process, a tight-knit community has been created, hospitable to both native-born Scots and Americans from diverse backgrounds. This is a modern clan, whose members are distinguished not only by the skill of their pipers and the mirth of their ceilidhs but by the magnitude of their Scottish hearts. ■

Dan Marshall is a freelance author and photographer based in St. Louis.



■ **Youngster Andrew Gowran develops his Scottish dancing skills at the ceilidh.**