

Irish Fest

By Gail Grenier Sweet ©2006

My favorite Milwaukee Irish Fest memories are tied up in the children's area. In the early 80s, my two little boys loved Gulliver and everything around him. Best of all was the ever-low-tech children's craft tent. The volunteers working there proved that kids don't need TV and video games to have fun. My boys never tired of making creations out of potatoes, toothpicks and gum drops. They labored intensely decorating their painter's caps, then wore them through the Festival grounds. To an adult eye, the hats often turned out really ugly and the potato crafts wound up cannibalized (gumdrops of course), but my boys loved it all -- and were proud of their work.

One year, craft tent volunteers challenged children to design a quilt square. The squares were to go into a quilt for Children's Hospital, I think. Charlie, my older son, took permanent markers and decorated his quilt square with a beautiful rainbow. He carefully lettered the words: "Look to the rainbow, and keep hope" or something like that -- rather inspirational words coming from an eight-year-old. We were delighted the following August when the finished quilt was displayed at Irish Fest, and of the hundreds of squares made the summer before, Charlie's was chosen to be sewn into the quilt — there was his rainbow square, uplifting message and all.

The highlight of the children's area was seanache (I can't spell it!) Batt Burns, who arrived each summer from Ireland to slap on his slouch hat and tell whopping tales in his old grandpa accent. One year he told the kids about capturing a leprechaun. He promised that the following year, he would bring back gold watches from the leprechaun and distribute them to all the children. Of course, the following August we returned and Batt never mentioned the watches. My son Brian hadn't forgotten. He asked me, "What about the watches?"

Brian wasn't too traumatized by the fib. We returned many times.

The End