St. Patrick's Day History

The person who was to become St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, was born in Wales about AD 385. His given name was Maewyn.

Far from being a saint, until he was sixteen, he considered himself a pagan. At that age, he was sold into slavery by a group of Irish marauders that raided his village. During his time in captivity, he became closer to God.

He escaped from slavery after six years and went to Gaul where he studied under St. Germaine, the bishop of Auxerre, for twelve years. His wishes were to return to Ireland and convert the native pagans to Christianity. However, his superiors appointed St. Palladius instead. Two years later, Palladius transferred to Scotland. Patrick, having adopted that Christian name earlier, was then appointed the second bishop to Ireland.

Patrick was very successful at winning converts. This fact upset the Celtic Druids. Patrick was arrested several times, but always escaped. He traveled throughout Ireland, establishing monasteries across the country. He also set up schools and churches, which would aid him in his conversion of Ireland to Christianity. His mission in Ireland lasted for thirty years, after which he retired to County Down. He died on March 17 in AD 461. That day has been commemorated as St. Patrick's Day ever since.

Much Irish folklore surrounds St. Patrick's Day; however, not much of it has been substantiated. Some of this lore includes the belief that Patrick raised people from the dead. He is also said to have given a sermon from a hilltop that drove all the snakes from Ireland. Of course, no snakes were ever native to Ireland, and some people believe this is a metaphor for the conversion of the pagans to Christianity.

Though originally a Catholic holy day, St. Patrick's Day has evolved into more of a secular holiday. One traditional icon of the day is the shamrock. This stems from a more bonafide Irish tale that tells how Patrick used the three-leafed shamrock to explain the Trinity. He used it in his sermons to represent how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit could all exist as separate elements of the same entity. His followers adopted the custom of wearing a shamrock on his feast day.

The St. Patrick's Day custom came to America in 1737. That was the first year that St. Patrick's Day was publicly celebrated in this country, in Boston.

Condensed by Larry McGrath from St. Patrick's Day Links-
http://wilstar.com/holidays/patrick.htm