

"The O'Donnell Brothers" by Nick Whitmer
An Piobaire Feabhra/February 2014 Vol. 10 No. 1

An Piobaire is the newsletter of Na Piobairi Uilleann, Dublin, Ireland, the granddaddy of Irish pipe clubs. This article republished here with the kind permission of Na Piobairi Uilleann.
<http://pipers.ie/>

Since the article was published new information has surfaced. Here are addenda to the article:

Edward O'Donnell died in 1928.

The O'Donnell family came from Na Rosa (The Rosses) section of Donegal.

The O'Donnell brothers visited Ireland at least twice, according to a descendant.

I have found mention of at least 133 engagements from 1903 to 1920.

I described the two key regulator as "probably" playing the notes C natural and B flat. I am now convinced that the notes are B and A, same as the B and A on the Bass regulator.



IN JUNE 2013 Bill Ochs of New York City told me of a couple from Long Island, Audrey and Brian Crotty, who had contacted him. They had a musical instrument, some kind of bagpipe, been in the basement for 30 years, and they wanted to know what they had. The set was in fact remarkable and elaborate, made by the Taylor Brothers of Philadelphia in the 19th century. In the basement along with the set, a trunk filled with material, much of it about piper Ed O'Donnell and his brother Cornelius, who had

careers in vaudeville in the USA, roughly 1903-1914. Their act was called The O'Donnell Brothers.

I ended up buying the pipes. The associated material, a scrapbook, photographs, posters, music printed and in manuscript, etc., was retained by the family, then subsequently donated to the Theatre Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and to the Irish Traditional Music Archive. I was fortunate enough to be provided with pictures of the material through the efforts of Bill Ochs and Ian Darson.

Cornelius (1875-1941) and Edward (1876 or 1878-?) were born in the USA, probably Brooklyn. Father born in Ireland, possibly Donegal. Father John O'Donnell was a trained musician, certainly a violinist. They had three other brothers, one of whom was a saloon owner.

Cornelius played violin, danced, and sang. Ed played Irish pipes and probably also highland pipes. In their vaudeville act Ed was the straight man, Cornelius the comedian. Cornelius was apparently the better actor of the two. More than once in reviews Ed was noted as a good musician, Cornelius not so much. Note that Cornelius played the violin and Ed played the Irish pipes, never “fiddle” or “uilleann” pipes.

In their promotional material the Brothers claimed to have played – and Ed to have won a bagpipe prize – at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. I have yet to find any independent confirmation of this. Their first known engagement was in the summer of 1903, playing at the “Irish Village” attraction at Luna Park,

an enormously successful amusement park at Coney Island, Brooklyn, New York.

I have documented almost four engagements per year in 1903-05. Nothing in 1906. Then from 1907 through 1913 about 12 engagements per year. Approximately 104 engagements in all from 1903 through 1920, at least two-thirds of them in vaudeville theatres. No doubt they played many more engagements than this. They mainly played theatres throughout New York and the New England states. Furthest west, Michigan, probably Detroit. Furthest south, Norfolk, Virginia. They played “big time” theatres once in a while, but mostly “small time” stuff; smaller towns, or less prestigious venues. They also played for political and fraternal organizations, church groups, businesses, etc.

Their act consisted of a skit or “playlet”, usually about 20 minutes long. It evoked nostalgia for a remembered Ireland. Names of the skits bear this out. Here are a few:

Dear Old Ireland
A Bit of Old Erin
Ould Times
In Olden Times
The Old Neighborhood

By the way, there is as yet no evidence one way or the other that the brothers ever visited Ireland. From the scrapbook, this newspaper review of a performance in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1912 gives some idea of what their act was like:

“...[T]he act being presented by the O’Donnell brothers at the Opera House compares favorably with acts given in leading vaudeville houses in this part of the state. The act consists of comedy, pathos and music and is bound to please. It was loudly applauded last evening and all who saw it pronounced it the best given here.

“Edward O’Donnell is a talented bagpipe player.... Cornelius represents an aged Irishman playing a violin. While he is playing a typical Irish air, Edward steals in and joins his brother in playing the same tune on the pipes. The motions that Cornelius makes as he hears the pipes is alone worth the price of admission. Cornelius then entertains the audience with a dance, although he begs his brother to stop playing as he is too old to continue the dance. He finally collapses on the stage. After being picked up, they bid each other good night, and Cornelius renders that old favorite, “Home Sweet Home”, in a very impressive manner.”

There are few clues as to exactly what music was played. The music manuscripts are extensive, but mostly from their father’s era and mostly for violin. Even so, there are several tunes in the music manuscripts which are well known today. “Rakish Paddy”, “McCloud’s Reel”, “Top of Cork Road” among others. There is a handwritten sheet with “The Blackbird” and “My Former Wife” dedicated to the Brothers by John Marron, another vaudevillian who played Irish pipes. And there are music parts for “Wearing of the Green” and “Have you Seen Maggie Riley”, the first intended to be played by the theatre orchestra as the Brothers take the stage. “Maggie Riley” is an “Irish Waltz”, a Tin Pan Alley tune published in 1904. It may have been played in the course of the playlet.

The brothers did well enough at performing to sustain a career for more than a decade, but were by no means at the pinnacle of the profession. In vaudeville, a pitiless indicator of success was an act’s position on the theatre program. To oversimplify, the least esteemed acts played earlier in the show, the most popular near the end. In this respect the O’Donnells were usually in the middle. Not infrequently, as with the review quoted above, they were a decided hit.



In 1920, after several years of apparent inactivity, the Brothers tried a comeback. It was not a success; I could find only two engagements for 1920, and a negative review in a trade magazine. Their act was considered quaint, old fashioned, out of date. Their last known performance was in July 1920.

As of this writing, nothing further is known of Ed after 1925, when he was employed as a bank clerk. Cornelius became an office clerk, ultimately working for the Borough of Brooklyn. He died in 1941. They became almost completely forgotten. Francis O'Neill does not mention O'Donnell in his books. Barry O'Neill, who has done a lot of research on American Irish pipers, never heard of them. Jim McGuire, also a thorough researcher, found but one reference to O'Donnell with an address in Brooklyn.

The O'Donnell Brothers represented one strain of Irish music and piping activity, now largely forgotten. Did they have an impact on the future of the music? Probably not much. Still, it can be interesting to examine different settings in which the Irish pipes were used, and how they were perceived and received.

A word about the O'Donnell set. It plays in D, at or perhaps just a bit sharp of concert pitch. The chanter is good example of the Taylors' ribbon-key style. The reedcap is ivory with a stop key. There are two drones, tenor and bass. The tenor drone is likely not by the Taylors, and a non-Taylor tenor drone part is in the earliest photographs, so the original has been missing a long time. There are six regulators. Tenor, baritone and bass. The double bass regulator is all metal, and may indicate the set was made earlier rather than later in the Taylors' career. There is a one key E regulator. Last but not least, a two key regulator which probably plays the notes C natural and B flat. The key touches sit between the D key on the baritone reg and the G key on the bass reg. I think it unlikely the set was made for Ed O'Donnell; he was 15 years old or younger when the Taylors stopped making pipes.

The information about the Brothers comes almost entirely from two sources: the papers associated with the set of pipes, and a remarkable on-line index to New York State newspapers, www.fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html