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## [The Maddest Man in Town]

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Oregon Folklore Studios 1939

American Folk Stuff Local Characters

### THE MADDEST MAN IN TOWN

By William Haight

Are ya religious? If ya are I won't tell this story. Awright, I guess it won't hurt ya none to hear it. It's about old man Donovan. He was as good a Catholic as I ever knew, until he got mad once. Then he was mad for 17 years — the maddest man in town. Ye-up, dingblasted mad and powerful mizzur'ble. Considering all in all, I reckon his being mad so long set a record of sorts for the whole danged county.

You're right, the old duffer was an Irishman. Being Irish, it didn't take much to start his blood a-boilin'. A kinda small man, inclined to be delicate, with long gray whiskers and a sizable mustache, he was quite a Injun on the warpath. His long gray chin whiskers would wave in the air sorta like they was fannin' the cuss words to take the heat offa them an they came out.

Well, among other things he had two kids, Harry and Joe. Harry was the little bugger and Joe was the big one. Joe was might nigh six-four. Joe bein' so tall and me bein' considerable shorter didn't no way effect our fightin' nearly every day at school. I reckon that was mainly why I went— so I could wallop Joe up; an' then got walloped up by Joe. We both seemed to like it.

One day I went to school prepared to give Joe a walloping, since he'd done walloped me the day before. But Joe wasn't there. Right away, I figgered somethin' mighty darned important musta happened to keep Joe from coming to school that day.

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Sure 'nuff, school hadn't been took up more'n a little while when somebody came by and told us old man Donovan had died. Soon's the teacher heard this she dismissed school. Seems like the widow Donovan was a-needin' some help at the house, so the teacher asked my side-kick, Bill, the long 'un, and me to go up there. Seein' as how my old man was the undertaker and had already loaned her the money to send for the priest to come and pray Donovan out of purgatory, I guess the teacher thought I was the one to send. Bill allus went where I did, him and me bein' the long an' short of it, as folks'd say.

Mrs. Donovan had to send to Vancouver for a priest, and the fellow that come was purty old and mighty set in his ways. I reckon he figgered he was close to God and didn't mind to allow he knew purty near as much.

And he did his job all right. After he got settled he put on all his robes and started to work. Him and Dad laid Donovan out on a board supported by two chairs, threw a sheet over him and put the required number of candles at his head and feet. Then the priest prayed and sprinkled water, and prayed and sprinkled water some more, till the old man Donovan was prayed and sprayed out of purgatory. Soon's the priest left, Bill and me was delegated to sit in the kitchen and watch the corpse, which was in the next room.

Donovan, bein' an Irishman, his passin' naturally allowed for a make. So every Irishman and German within forty miles came to set up for the night. The Germans in our part was not much on wakin' the dead, but because they was mighty thick with the Irish they was willing to help the Irish wake their dead 'uns. All foreigners in them days stuck purty close together, ya know. These wakers set around in another room with the family, and were a-passin' a sociable evenin'. Most of 'em were drinkin' out of a couple of demijohns I saw on the table when some Irishman stuck his head out the door to see if Donovan was 3 a-lyin' out right. The rest of the people were a-playin' cards and talkin' to the widow. Seems as though they'd drink, play cards awhile, then the widow'd wail a bite.

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Me and Bill bein' too young to wake had to pass the time tryin' to read in the kitchen. This was kinda hard to do. The house was built on a hill, almost the crest, causin' the shakes to catch all the wind. That old wind would howl a mighty bit when she'd hit the shakes. The wind a-howlin', coupled with the wail of the wakers, sort of discommoded Bill and me. Bill was plenty scairt anyhow. Donovan was the first corpse he'd ever been around. So's all that howlin' had Bill a-settin' mighty uncomfortable like in his chair, and kept me kinda on the uneasy side.

All of a sudden Bill and me heard the consarndest noise I've ever heard, or expect to hear. Bill jumped from his chair scairt like and says, kind of quavery like, "What's that?" By this time I'm a-standin' on my feet and a-listenin'. Sure 'nuff! 'Tweren't the mind nor the wakers — the sound was a-comin' from that corpse.

Now, Bill, not a-takin' his job none too good no ways, decided he wanted to leave. "Shucks", I says to Bill, tryin' to calm him, "its probably the cat." God! I thought that was terrible. Here them wakers were a-dependin' on Bill and me to watch the corpse and we'd done let the cat in! I told Bill to be real quiet like and we wouldn't disturb nothin', and to bring the metal-plated lamp along so's we could see.

Bill and me sort of crept into the room. Soon's the light hit that corpse we could see the sheet a goin' up and down, up and down, with the awfulest noise a-comin' out from under it. Bill takes a good look, tries to 4 hand me the rattlin' lamp, shakin' his hands, and says, "By God, I'm a-gettin' out of here!" He shoves the lamp in my hand and runs like a scairt nigger for home. I figgers him bein' so much bigger'n me, there's a lot more of him scairt than there is of me, so I goes up closer.

For a spell I watched. Then I goes over and gingerly lifts up the sheet, sort of expectin' to see the cat. By that time some of the wakers heard the noise and came edging in to see what it was all about.

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Well, I'll be dingblasted if old man Donovan wasn't a-breathin'. Yes air, the old coot was as alive as you or me right now. That peculiar noise we'd been hearin' under the sheet was him a-breathin'. Right away the fellers picked him up and toted him into the bedroom. They wrapped warm blankets-round him and nursed him back to full breath. Purty soon he took a pull at the demijohn his-self. And was his wife happy! Everybody was real excited.

In a few days Donovan was out on the streets again, a well man. He lived for 17 years more.

And here's what made him mad all that time:

The priest, bein' mighty set in his ways, wouldn't let Donovan nor his family go to church no more. He figgered Donovan had pulled the trick of playin' possum on him. And even if he hadn't it looked like God thought the old cuss was such a sinner that he had to be sent back to earth. Anyway, the priest said he had prayed old Donovan out of purgatory and now he was beyond the jurisdiction of the Church.

Mad? I reckon there never was a madder Irishman than old man Donovan. You could just see it boiling out of him as he walked down the street. If you wanted to see them chin whiskers of his fan the air, you only had to mention 5 purgatory or the priest to him. His old lady got to swearin' like a trooper, and between the two of 'em I guess they really told the priest off.

Ye-up. Donovan stayed mad for 17 years. Maybe be still is, I don't profess to know. A freight train finally put an end to his mortal life; it took that to kill him. But he had to die sometime.

Form A

Circumstances of Interview

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Federal Writer's Project

Works Progress Administration

### OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker William C. Haight Date February 24, 1939

Address 1225 S.W. Alder Street. Portland. Oregon.

Subject Occupational Lore.

Name and address of informant Charles Imus, 1624 S.W. 16th Street, Portland, Ore.

Date and time of interview 1624 S.W. 16th Street, Portland, Oregon.

Place of interview

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant

Joseph McLaughlin, project office.

Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Mr. Imus' home is in a low-income district, located at the end of an alley. The house is an unpainted, weather-beaten, two-story building. Steps rise from the ground to a porch on the second floor; leading to an apartment.

His front porch is underneath these steps. A rickety door opens to a second flight of dark, unkempt, dirty steps. At the top of these steps a door opens into a long, musty smelling, ill-lighted hallway.

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The hallway widens into a kitchen used by the informant and wife. The interview was conducted in a small, unclean living room. Old chairs, and tables filled the small room. A radio many years old stood under an unwashed window.

An incongruity in this obvious setting of poverty were many fine pieces 2 of china and glassware. These, presumably, a hold-over from the more abundant life!

Form B

Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker William C. Haight Date February 24, 1939

Address 1225 S.W. Alder Street. Portland, Oregon.

Subject Occupational Lore.

Name and address of informant Charles Imus, 1624 S. W. 16th Street

Portland Oregon.

Information obtained should supply the following facts:

1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth

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3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupations and accomplishments with dates
7. Special skills and interests
8. Community and religious activities
9. Description of informant
10. Other points gaited in interview

1. English and Irish.

2. Roxberry, Kansas, June 11, 1879.

3. Wife.

4. Roxberry, Kansas, 1879, to 1889, Portland, Oregon, 1900 to 1939. Kalama, Washington, 1889 to 1900.

5. "Ain't had none."

Wife: "You have to Charley, now tell him what he wants."

Charley: "Will, maybe a little grammar school. I can write purty good."

Wife: "Yes, Charley, a real pretty hand you write."

Charley: "I learned a little as I went along."

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6. Farm worker, logger, livery stable keeper, dance hall manager, “jack-of-all-trades.”

7. Cribbage, and playing wind instruments, 2

8. None.

9. Light blue eyes shaded by light eyebrows accentuate the informant's smooth features. His face is expressive; the movements of his eyebrows punctuate his speech. A faded, ragged, brown tie, against a once bright green shirt supplied a concession and mark of distinction to the occasion. His suit was a peculiar color of blue, nearly green. He wore light brown shoes and dark socks that were held up by large safety pins.