

The Shamrock

The shamrock, with its three tiny leaves is always associated with the Irish and the story of St. Patrick. It is often confused with clover. The shamrock is usually smaller than clover but shamrocks and clover, all belong to the pea family. The term "shamrock" is derived from the Irish word, seamrog which translates to "Summer Plant." Shamrocks usually grow on mossy banks and are of a vine type plant, known as "medick." Any Irish person will quickly know exactly where to find one. The Irish will tell you they only grow in Ireland and with the same breath explain that St. Patrick drove the snakes from Ireland over 1,500 years ago.

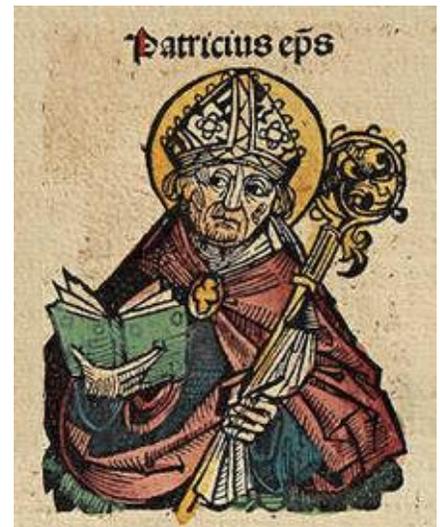
The Legend of St. Patrick and Irish Shamrocks

St. Patrick was born to a Roman family (living in Wales - according to most authorities) when he was kidnapped as a young boy. From there he was taken to Ireland and sold to an Irish Chieftain. Here he was put to tending to sheep on Sliabh Mish. One night he had a vision, instructing him to escape to a place where he would find a ship to take him to freedom. He followed his vision, and eventually studied in Rome and became a priest. Many years had passed when he had a second vision, of the Irish people calling him to return and bring them hope.

St. Patrick returned to Ireland around the year 432 A.D. He began to travel the land, bringing the news of Christianity for all who would listen. Palladius had made the trip before him (about 60 years before) but had little success in converting the pagan Irish. St. Patrick, having spent his childhood amongst the Irish, was well versed in the Irish culture and found ways to incorporate the pagan customs into the new Christian ideals. The native Celts were finely in tune with nature where springs and wells represented the source of water and therefore life. St. Patrick blessed these wells and the once location of many pagan rituals became newly ordained Holy Wells.

Shortly before the Feast of Bealtaine (The Festival of Fire) a major Celtic tradition, St. Patrick visited the hill of Slane, Co. Meath. In keeping with Celtic customs, no one was supposed to light any fire before the king, and all subsequent fire should be lit from a flame from that fire. Here, surrounded by a large group of local natives, he began to explain the Holy Trinity, and took a shamrock from the ground to explain the concept of three persons of God.

As part of the Easter Celebrations, he lit the Pascal fire, and preached to his new converts to Christianity. On a distant hill at Tara, the King's advisors, the druids,



warned that if Patrick's fire was not extinguished immediately it would burn for centuries. It was on that night, over 1,500 years ago, that the tiny shamrock became a major iconic symbol for the Irish race, a tradition that continues to this very day.