

CHARMED TO BE IRISH

BY GERI PARLIN

If there's one thing Bill Watkins likes to do above all others, it's chatting up a new friend. At Merlin's Rest pub in Minneapolis, he doesn't bother himself with finances or how many bottles of Bushmills to stock.

"At the pub, I'm not part of the executive branch. I have an official title. I am the Minister of Culture. My job is to make sure the people are having a good time, all of the time. I shake hands with all the men and kiss all the ladies. Who could ask for a better job than that?"

Turns out, festivals such as Irishfest might be a bit better, because there are even more people to meet and greet and pass the time of day with a story or two. He has performed as a storyteller at the Irish festival in St. Paul for years and through that hooked up with La Crosse's Irishfest, which he proclaims to be as fine and dandy a festival as an Irishman could want to attend.

"It's more cozy. The St. Paul thing is a bit of a Woodstock," he said, making it possible to miss a friend in the crowd. But in La Crosse, he can hook up with old friends and make new ones.

He came to America in 1994 for the love of a good woman. And why not? That's an Irish tradition, Watkins said.

"There's only two reasons the Irish travel in a hurry—for romance or the police are looking for them!"

But seriously, the Irish love nothing better than a good time, which is why so many love the Irish, he said.

"Where a lot of cultures have stumped around the world with a bullet and a bayonet, we've done it with a song and dance and a good story. Story-telling is deep in the human psyche—folks love to do that. I think the fact that we've always been portrayed by our next-door neighbors as arrogant, boastful, drunken, violent people, and the English are portrayed as gentlemen who love to play cricket ... who made this lot up?"

Never mind, Watkins can't fret about it for long because he's made a new friend on the phone and he'd rather charm her than bemoan the rudeness of Englishmen.

"The Irish have colonized the world with fun. People love to be around Irish people."

When he comes to La Crosse, he likely will read excerpts from his new book, "The Once and Future Celt," and answer questions about the Irish culture. "I like to fly by the seat of me pants," he said.

FUN FACTS ABOUT BILL WATKINS

His wintertime occupation is kilt making. "I have my mighty Singer sewing machine set up in the house," he said, and that gives him something to do besides shoveling. "It beats the hell out of going outside."

"I'm the famous low-intensity gardener," he said, which means he picks the tomatoes when it's time to eat them. He leaves the weeding to wife Katie, who banned him from the garden when he pulled up plants the first time he tried weeding for her. "I'm a Druid, so I'm infamously crafty. She won't let me near the garden anymore."

Katie is a farm girl who loves to garden. He calls that muck savage. "It's a person who comes home from work and they get out of their nice day clothes and they can't wait to get into shorts and get covered in mud. That's what my Wisconsin farm girl likes to do."

In "The Once and Future Celt," Watkins uses lyrical narrative and intellectual humor to look at what it means to be a Celt—and how he got there.

Born in Birmingham, England, to an Irish mother and a Welsh father—both musicians and raconteurs—he spent two decades living in Scotland and sailing the seven seas with Her Majesty's merchant navy. He came to the United States with his American wife, where he now dedicates his life to passing on the ideals of the true Celt.

