

Fun in the 1890s: The McGinty Club

By Aaron Trujillo

Down went McGinty to the bottom of the sea ... dressed in his best suit of clothes." These words from "Down Went McGinty," a song by the Irishman Joseph Flynn, became the basis of the name for one of the most beloved clubs in El Paso during the '90s. The 1890s, that is.

How did the McGinty Club come about? There wasn't an official record of its beginning. According to Conrey Bryson in his book *Down Went McGinty: El Paso in the Wonderful Nineties*, the club got its start at the Independent Assay Office of Dan W. "Reck" Reckhart and Otto F. "Heck" Heckelmann. The assay office was located on the southwest corner of San Francisco and Chihuahua Streets, where the El Paso Civic Center now stands.

Reck learned to play some chords, usually in the key of G, on an old Martin guitar owned by Heck. Reck acquired a mandolin which Heck learned to play. Peg Grandover, so named because he had a peg leg, would join Reck and Heck. Peg loved to sing and create comedic songs and felt right at home with a Dutch or Irish dialect. From this point on, music could be heard from outside the Independent Assay Office. C. L. Sonnichsen in his book *Pass of the North: Four Centuries on the Rio Grande Volume I 1529-1917* stated that the growing group "began meeting for instrumental music, barbershop singing, gossip and beer at the assay offices."

The group would regularly go on picnics, taking beer and meat with them. During one of these gatherings, the men planned a hunting trip. Peg, who specialized in painting signs, drove a buckboard with supplies. Bryson related that "displayed over the picnic supplies were signs reading 'ice water' and 'Barbecued Burro Meat.' More important was a sign which stretched the entire length of the wagon." This sign was put there to answer any questions of where they were headed. It said "Hunting for McGinty." What began as a joke became the name of their club.

The only president the club ever had was Dan W. Reckhart. According to historian Leon Metz in an article for the *El Paso Times*, Dan Reckhart was an extraordinary personality. He was an athlete and had graduated from Columbia University. While at Columbia, he was a member of the crew team. Reckhart was also known for his enormous appetite. For breakfast

he consumed a dozen eggs and he could eat a whole turkey for dinner. His weight went from 270 pounds up to 310 during his lifetime. Sonnichsen said that he would buy three seats at the opera. One was for his wife and the other two were for him. He would have the arm removed between the two. Reckhart encompassed the heart and attitude of the McGinty Club and its members.

J. D. Ponder, who was the official scribe for the McGinty Club and editor of the *El Paso Times*, explained in an article that two years after its beginning, the McGinty Club had in its membership nearly all of the business and professional men in El Paso. Bryson wrote that the *El Paso Herald* stated in one of a series of articles about the club in 1909 that "everyone who was in El Paso in the latter eighties and early nineties either belonged to the McGinty Club or was dead."

The McGinty Club was an all men's club. James J. Watts, a McGinty Club secretary, told Cleofas Calleros in an article for the *El Paso Times*: "We didn't allow women to come to our meetings or parties. The fact is we didn't want them. We were strictly a men's club, organized for fellowship and to entertain the people in town." The club with its well-dressed professional gentlemen and their spirit of comedy, music and showmanship, had a constitution. The constitution proved to be an extension of their comedic spirit. For example, *El Paso Herald-Post* reporter Marshall Hail noted, "Article 399,999, section 999,999, required a single man to swear he would not make love as long as he lived. The applicant for membership was required to answer rapid questions in Spanish, French, German and Chinese."



The McGinty Club Band, complete with cannons, is shown here in a bandshell constructed on an adjoining lot to the Assay Office of Dan Reckhart and Otto Heckelmann. (Photo courtesy of the El Paso Public Library, Aultman Photo Collection, B72a)

barriers within itself, and blissfully, wonderfully oblivious to the different nationalities and races of this number." Marshall Hail wrote that the club "soon became so extensive and its activities so varied that it served the purpose of everything from vaudeville entertainment to a chamber of commerce."

The parties the club gave were events not to be missed. Sonnichsen related that invitations were sent on cards on which was written "Failure to attend forfeits all future recognition." No one wanted to miss these occasions. At the end of the parties, guests were treated to fireworks, and sometimes the McGinty cannons were fired. Sources vary as to where the cannons came from. One variation is that Reck had gotten the cannons from Joseph and Samuel Schutz, who had obtained them when Camp Concordia was deserted.

The club obtained a hill, which the *El Paso Times* article "Going To Hunt McGinty," said was a sand dune between Santa Fe and Chihuahua Streets, and Main and Franklin Streets. The area later became the site for the present day Union Depot. It was on this hill that the McGinty Club built its "fort." On July 4, 1895, the McGintys, at Fort McGinty, loaded the cannon with four pounds of black powder and lit it! The cannon blasted out nearly every window in the San Francisco Street area. As the *Times* article said, "From that time on the cannon was fired from Fort McGinty, with its muzzle pointed at the sky. It still rattled dishes all over town."

Bryson points out that the club had a military department and one of their acts was to storm McGinty Hill. Peg Grandover was in charge of the McGinty Light Guards. Richard C. Lightbody, a former Mayor of El Paso, led the McGinty Plug Hat Brigade. Dr. P. S. Jenkins, a physician, led the Stiff Hat Brigade. All of these were involved with the parades that the club led, along with the Flambeau Club, which would light the sky. The parades would usually end up at Mesa Gardens, a popular gathering place of the time. Richard Bussell, a member of the El Paso Historical Society, related in an interview that the building which houses the El Paso Historical Society is located where Mesa Gardens used to be. Bussell also stated that the McGinty cannon became the property of the Eastwood High School Troopers in the 1960s.

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The McGinty Club began at the Assay Office of Dan "Reck" Reckhart (left) and Otto "Heck" Heckelmann (right). (Photo courtesy of the El Paso Public Library, Aultman Photo Collection, B254)

Sonnichsen said that the club's purpose was to "put down liquor." However, the club did not allow bartenders or saloonkeepers into their ranks, and Bryson noted that on at least one occasion the McGinty band led a parade to a reform rally to rid El Paso of saloons, open gambling and the red-light district.

The McGinty Club was a group like no other. As Calleros explained, "Their group was unique, paying no dues, receiving no salary, threatening no strikes, endorsing no political parties, recognizing no religious or social

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The McGinty Club loved having a good time and members were masters of the art of parody. One event they parodied labeled the McGintys as “rainmakers,” a title that they wore with pride. Norman Walker, in an article for the *El Paso Times*, explained that in the early 1890s, Washington, D.C. had sent a group of scientists on a rainmaking expedition. On top of Mount Franklin, the scientists sent up kites and balloons and even went as far as sending a scientist up in a hot air balloon to try to produce rain for the El Paso area. The scientific group finished with no results and wounded egos. J. D. Ponder wrote in the *Times* that the “government rainmakers” left El Paso for Arizona and Colorado.

Ponder said that the McGinty Club later entertained delegates from the railroad convention being held in El Paso. The delegates were introduced to the “McGinty rainmakers.” Ponder said the rainmakers, D.W. Reckhart, W. M. McCoy, J. J. Longwell, and J. J. Watts, were wearing rubber coats and carried balloons and fireworks. After releasing the balloons and setting off the skyrocket bombs, water began pouring off the roof. When the delegates went to see where the water was coming from, they saw men with hoses pouring water on the roof. The parody of the “government rainmakers” was a hit with the convention.

Heck and Reck’s guitar and mandolin and Peg’s voice were the beginnings of the McGinty Band. At first it might not have been the best music around, but as more men joined the first three and they continued practicing, the band eventually became very good. They had become so good, in fact, that they performed for almost every civic event. In an article for the *Times*, Leon Metz said, “The club played for funerals, parties and weddings, even serenading the city during the Christmas and New Year periods.” Calleros said, “There were about 200 members composing eight complete musical organizations in McGinty Club” including a concert band, a brass band, a choir, drum and fife corps and orchestra, each with a manager and director.

There were concerts every week in what we know as the San Jacinto Plaza. The band began in earnest according to Bryson when it was organized in December 1891. The band’s first public appearance was in the St. Patrick’s Day parade in 1892. The streets were not in the best of shape at that time. The musicians had a hard time keeping their eyes on their music because of stepping into the many holes in the streets. Bryson says, “Manager Reckhart gave his frank opinion of the music – it was a

cross between a catfight and a boiler factory shop.” The band quickly improved from there.

The addition of Professor Carl Pitzer in 1894 helped to make the band even better. He helped them improve and gave them a broader selection of songs. He also helped to recruit some other top performers to the band. Calleros wrote that the “McGinty Club commanded El Paso’s respect and received it. The musicians were, for the most part, family men, and all were gentlemen of the old school. Whatever the performance or occasion, whatever the season, each man appeared in full, appropriate dress – a three-piece suit.” David Romo in his book *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juarez, 1893-1923* stated that the McGinty Band later became the core of the El Paso Symphony Orchestra.

Pat Worthington, the curator for the El Paso Historical Society, stated in an interview that the McGinty Club was very involved with just about every event in El Paso. It promoted boxing matches, cycling events and, of course, it held many performances at the Mesa Gardens. Every civic event was headlined by the McGintys, anything from entertaining the President of the United States to just promoting a picnic for the town. The *El Paso Evening Post* stated that “whenever the McGinty club gave entertainment, pages would carry beer into the audience. Fred (“Peg”) Grandover would always entertain by tossing his peg leg into the air.” The McGintys were greatly loved by the town and were expected to perform at every event.

The end of the McGinty Club was not announced. It had no formal farewell. It didn’t even have one big going away celebration. It just went away with the beginning of the twentieth century. Bryson wrote that “In El Paso, the coming of the twentieth century brought demands from citizens for cleanup, physically and morally. Leading citizens had more serious things to do than to go through the ritual of a McGinty parade, with its marching units, fireworks and cannon.” Bryson added that President Reckhart had a son and a daughter



Peg Grandover would place the “Hunting for McGinty” sign on the wagon the club members used on their picnics and hunting trips. (Photo courtesy of the El Paso Public Library, Aultman Photo Collection, B77)

at home and was spending more time there with them. Peg Grandover seemed to have left the McGinty scene during the late nineties.

Richard Bussell said that Heckelmann had moved to Mexico to establish his own assay office. Professor Carl Pitzer moved to Seattle in 1902. Bryson wrote what Reckhart told the *El Paso Herald-Post* about the band’s last performance. He said, “The last number was the McGinty song, and then when ‘Auld Lang Syne’ was finished, the members tucked their instruments under their arms and took them home as relics of the greatest musical organization El Paso has ever known.”

Camaraderie seemed to be key in the McGinty club. The club that started off with three gentlemen playing music and joking in front of an assay office became El Paso’s biggest pastime. Being a part of the McGinty Club brought camaraderie not only to its members but also to the entire town. At every event the townspeople gathered to see what the McGintys had in store. With their music, comedy, parades and other entertainment, the club became the heart and soul of the town. The McGinty Club reflected the light-hearted spirit of the time and demonstrated a sense of community. 🎵



Playing in the McGinty String Orchestra were Dan Reckhart, first row, second from right, and Otto Heckelmann, back row, standing far right. (Photo courtesy of the El Paso Public Library, Aultman Photo Collection, A5998)



The McGinty Light Guards marched in parades and were led by Peg Grandover, shown here on the left using a crutch instead of his peg leg. (Photo courtesy of the El Paso Public Library, Aultman Photo Collection, A5982)